

An INTRODUCTION



to

ST JOHN

of the CROSS

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AN INTRODUCTION TO
SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS
El Carmelo Retreat House

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Printed at Darlington Carmel

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PREFACE

This is a revised version of a course of lectures given originally to Carmelite students. The lectures were later taped at Glasgow Carmel for the Association of Carmels in Great Britain. Chapters one and ten were papers read at a Symposium on St John of the Cross, held at Digby Stuart College in July 1984. The Appendix 'Reading St John of the Cross' has been added at the request of some readers of *Mount Carmel* magazine, where it appeared in the Autumn issue 1980.

I am indebted to Darlington Carmel for the editing and printing. My thanks are also due to the Sister of Darlington Carmel who kindly undertook the task of transcribing the tapes.

For the prose works of St John of the Cross the Kavanaugh-Otilio (K) translation has been used.

'St John of the Cross did not write his works with a view to the investigation of scholars or those engaged in higher studies; they were written for the purpose of directing contemplatives toward union with God'.

Karol Wojtyla, *Faith According to St John of the Cross*
(Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1981)

CHAPTER ONE

SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS, DOCTOR OF DIVINE LOVE

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS may be described as one who had an experience of the cross in the transforming power of divine love. Divine love was his primary intuition. His life bore no other witness. His writings carry no other message. But it is one thing to have a message and another to get the message across. St John was often at a loss how to explain what God's love for us really means. Just as the whole economy of the redemption becomes intelligible only in the light of an absolutely infinite love, so the life and writings of St John of the Cross can be understood only as the enterprise of a great lover, one who was caught up in that infinite love, and lived out its implications, and sang about it in his poems, and tried to explain it in his commentaries.

The popular image of St John of the Cross is related to texts like Mark 8:34, that we are to take up our cross in denial of self. One has to accept his gospel text. But when he goes on to apply this saying to the annihilation of all sweetness in God, the pure spiritual cross and nakedness or poverty of spirit — then there is hesitation and misunderstanding of his message. St John knew from experience that the true lover leans more towards going without everything for God than towards possession. He prefers dryness and affliction to sweet consolation. He knows that this is the significance of discipleship, and that any other method is perhaps a seeking of oneself in God — something entirely contrary to love (II *Ascent* 7:5).

St John did not deny the value of spiritual consolation. But he saw clearly that only a purified soul could taste the pure consolations of God. Clothing one's natural self in spiritual

feelings was not the road to a purified love. He was distressed that people should make such a mistake: 'O, who can make this counsel of our Saviour understandable, and practicable, and attractive that spiritual persons might become aware of the difference between the method many of them think good and that which ought to be followed on this road' (II *Ascent* 7:5).

Our task is to make St John's doctrine understandable and practicable and attractive. To do this we must not separate his life from his teaching, nor think of him as one who knew and spoke only about the rigours of divine purification. His own discovery in the depths of obscure contemplation was a strange refreshment of soul and a new spiritual strength that enabled him to endure the purity of God, and led him on eventually to the state of 'walking always with his Spouse in the delights of love' (*Sp. Cant.* 27:8).

Because God's love is transcendent and demanding, we are inclined to think of it as remote, cold and virile. St John tells us, on the contrary, that God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that no mother's affection, in which she tenderly embraces her child, nor brother's love, nor friendship is comparable to it. 'The tenderness and truth of love by which the immense Father favours and exalts this humble and loving soul reaches such a degree . . . that the Father Himself becomes subject to her for her exaltation, as though He were her servant and she His lord' (ibid.). In St John of the Cross we do not meet the rough ascetic who preached severity to others. His own intimate experience of the tenderness of divine love is reflected in his writings: 'O living flame of love, How tenderly you swell my heart'. It is reflected also in his dealings with others. 'Your griefs and troubles and times of loneliness, even when you have said nothing about them, have always cried out to me . . . All these things are rappings and knockings upon the soul, calling it to greater love . . .' (Letter to Dona Juana de Pedrosa).

Life

The early life of St John of the Cross was a weave of love

and suffering. He was born in 1542 at Fontiveros, Spain. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes, was a wealthy silk merchant. His mother was a poor weaver named Catalina Alvarez. They met at Medina, where the silk trade was flourishing. The marriage so enraged Gonzalo's relatives that they disowned him. But he preferred to suffer the poverty of his new status because of his love. In addition, he contracted an illness which drained out their meagre resources, and he died shortly after John was born. The poor widow with her two sons, Francis and John, found it difficult to make ends meet. A third son, Luis, had died some time previously and, fearing the same fate for her youngest child, she placed John in a kind of orphanage at Medina when he was nine years old. Here he remained for eight years, trying his hand in turn, though not too successfully, as carpenter, tailor, wood-carver and painter. He also had to beg on the streets for the upkeep of the orphanage. When he was seventeen he took up nursing at the local hospital. This also meant collecting alms for the poor patients, as well as first-hand contact with their suffering. In the meantime he got permission to attend the Jesuit college quite near, but his only time for study was very late at night. That he was not embittered by all this hardship is clear from the fact that when he was offered an easier career as eventual chaplain to the hospital, he opted instead for membership at the Carmelite Friary a few streets away, and shortly afterwards had his heart set on becoming a Carthusian.

He was twenty-five when he first met Saint Teresa and she persuaded him to become founder-member of Duruelo, cradle of the Discalced Reform. Although the required permissions had been granted, the launching of the Reform seemed like treason to the other Carmelite brethren. The authority of the Chapter of Piacenza was invoked against him. He was kidnapped on the night of 3 to 4 December, 1577, and was taken prisoner to Toledo, where everything possible was done to make him renounce this project of the Reform. His imprisonment lasted nine months, in an airless cell with only a small opening high up for a little light. He suffered intensely at this time in body and in spirit. But these extraordinary sufferings served to complete

his preparation for the highest spiritual favours. The prison was a bodily illustration of what was happening in his soul. He used its imagery afterwards in describing the night of the spirit.

Until the Lord finishes purging him in the way He desires, no remedy is a help to him in his sorrow. He resembles one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hand and foot, and able neither to move, nor see, nor feel any favour from heaven or earth. He remains in this condition until his spirit is humbled, softened and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God (2 D. Night 7:3, K 341).

Towards the end of his imprisonment, his jailer gave him a few scraps of paper on which he was able to write down some of the verses he had composed during that time. From these verses we can learn what degree of spiritual refinement he had attained. It is clear from Stanza 27 (*Spiritual Canticle*) that he had made a complete gift of himself to God.

There He gave me His breast,
There He taught me a sweet and living knowledge.
And I gave myself to Him,
Keeping nothing back;
There I promised to be His bride.

When St John commented on these lines afterwards, he explained that 'giving one's breast' to another signifies giving love and friendship and revealing secrets to him as to a friend.

When the soul says that there He gave her His breast, she means that He communicated His love and secrets to her there . . . The sweet and living knowledge she says He taught her is mystical theology, that secret knowledge of God which spiritual persons call contemplation. This knowledge is very delightful because it is a knowledge through love. Love is the master of this knowledge and that which makes it wholly agreeable. Since God communicates this knowledge and understanding in the love with which He communicates Himself to the soul, it is very delightful.

There is no doubt, then, that by the time of his escape from prison St John had reached the summit of the spiritual life. All his written work dates from after this time. That is why

he is such a confident writer. He is not feeling his way. Sometimes he may even appear too absolute in his doctrine of the cross and denial of self. But he is speaking the language of a lover, inebriated at a divine source. 'The strength and vehemence of love', he says, 'has this trait. Everything seems possible to it and it believes everyone is occupied as it is; it does not believe anyone could be employed in any other way or seek any other than Him Whom it seeks and loves' (2 D. Night 13:7, K 359). Moreover, in speaking of suffering, St John never appeals to his own travail or agony, as he might well have done. He appeals rather to the inner gospel, that is, to the experience of Christ himself as he brought forth our salvation.

In this high estate of the Spiritual Marriage, the Spouse reveals His wondrous secrets to the soul with great readiness and frequency, and describes His works to her, for true and perfect love can keep nothing hidden . . . And thus He speaks with her and tells her how by means of the tree of the Cross she was betrothed to Him, how He gave her herein the favour of His mercy, being pleased to die for her and making her beautiful after this manner (*Sp. Cant.* 28:1, Peers 2:143).

The secrets of divine love revealed thus to St John of the Cross, he tries to express in writing. Christ was really his textbook, and it was in his cross that he learned the science of mystical theology. So we are not surprised to read that one day when he saw a picture of our Lord falling beneath the cross, crushed like grapes in the winepress, he was rapt in wonder unable to resist the ecstasy. It is in this light, too, that we are to interpret his reply when Christ asked him from the cross in Segovia what reward he desired for a service he had just rendered him: 'Lord, what I wish you to give me are sufferings to be borne for your sake, and that I may be despised and regarded as worthless'.

His prayer was heard. From that time he was drawn more intimately into the redemptive sufferings of Christ. Calumnies were spread about him and there was even talk of expelling him from the Order. After the Madrid Chapter in 1591, he was sent more or less in disgrace to Penuela. In September he fell ill. They offered him a choice of two houses for a period of

convalescence and he chose Ubeda where he knew he would suffer more. After indescribable physical sufferings, he died on 14 December 1591.

That a person should opt for more suffering sounds a bit morbid and repulsive until we examine the situation more closely. St John did not ask simply for suffering, but 'sufferings to be borne for your sake', which is quite a different thing. He was opting rather for more love. It could not be otherwise in the state of spiritual espousal.

This soul that is now perfect is all love, if one may express it so, and all her actions love . . . giving up everything for this treasure of love she has found hidden in God . . . Like the bee that sucks honey from all the wild flowers and will not use them for anything else, the soul easily extracts the sweetness of love from all things that happen to her, that is, she loves God in them . . . And being informed and fortified as she is with love, she neither feels, nor tastes, nor knows the things that happen to her, whether delightful or bitter, since as we said the soul knows nothing else but love (*Sp. Cant.* 27:8).

St John saw nothing in the crucifix but love. His desire for suffering sounds more reasonable when we realise what he was looking for. He could extract the sweetness of love more deeply from this kind of identification with his beloved Christ. For there is a unique interchange of love that takes place only on the cross.

Writings

It is significant that the major works of St John of the Cross are three love poems, with their commentaries: *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Cantic*, and *The Living Flame*. His minor works are some counsels on perfection, *Sayings of Light and Love*, *Maxims of Love*, and some *Romances* on God's love-story of creation and redemption. A look into almost any of his writings is enough to convince us that divine love was the burden of his message.

The Dark Night poem was composed by St John shortly after his prison experience in Toledo. The stanzas are not a

lament because of personal pain or struggle. 'The soul recites them when it has already reached the state of perfection — that is, union with God through love — and has now passed through severe trials and conflicts . . . The soul must ordinarily walk this path to reach that sublime and joyous union with God' (1 *Dark Night*, Prol.). There are two sets of commentaries on the poem: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (3 books), and *The Dark Night of the Soul* (2 books). Because of the unity of the theme and St John's own intention, the two are grouped in one *Ascent-Night*. Whereas *The Spiritual Cantic* deals with the state of perfect love, and *The Living Flame* with certain acts of love of rare perfection within that state, the *Ascent-Night* deals with the journey, the struggle for perfect love, 'the way a soul must conduct itself along the road leading to union with God through love'.

Many readers of *Ascent-Night* stop short at I *Ascent* 13, because of the narrowness of the path and the fact that so few follow it. The doctrine of the way is felt to be a constraint, inhibiting our freedom. On the contrary, the whole *Ascent-Night* is concerned with liberation, so that the soul can go out from self in search of the living God, until it embraces him in a union of love. St John's rigour is orientated towards true freedom, the freedom to love. For him, the way to union with God, the struggle for a perfect love, is a paschal mystery on the model of Christ's death and resurrection. *The Dark Night* poem is like an Easter Exultet, or like the Cantic of Moses after the liberation of his people into the freedom of the children of God.

The Exodus image dominated the entire Old Testament. The emphasis was on the divine power and mercy at work on behalf of the chosen people. St John never forgets this aspect of the soul's new-found freedom. The metaphor used in the poem was the wretched state of captivity. 'It is a sheer grace to be released from this prison without hindrance from the jailers. The soul, through original sin, is a captive in the mortal body, subject to passions and natural appetites; when liberated from this bondage and submission, it considers its escape a sheer grace' (I *Ascent* 15:1).

The divine dimension of the whole enterprise was uppermost in St John's mind. It is the key to the obscure night of contemplation and accounts for its many benefits. For even though the night darkens the spirit, it does this only to give light. It humbles the soul and reveals its miseries only to raise it up. It deprives it of possessions and natural affections only 'that it may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things with a general freedom of spirit in them all' (II *Night* 9:1). But the principal benefit, the principal reason why St John celebrates the night, 'more lovely than the dawn' is expressed in the stanza:

O night that has united
The Lover with His beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

The soul can now sing a new song of love and converse with Christ as bride with Bridegroom.

The Spiritual Cantic has been described as a loving colloquy in lyric form between St John of the Cross and Christ as Bride and Bridegroom (Kavanaugh, *Intro.*). The stanzas were composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding, a secret, infused, loving knowledge of God. The commentary was written at the request of Mother Anne of Jesus, whom the Lord had favoured in a special way and had led beyond the state of beginners into the depths of his love. St John addresses her in the Prologue: 'Even though your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology by which divine truths are understood, you are not wanting in mystical theology which is known through love, and by which one not only knows but at the same time experiences'. In the *Cantic* the soul has arrived at the state of union with God, but is not resting in a static condition. The commentary shows that it is only now that the great events of love begin to take place.

The soul has come safely through the trials of sense purification, and has observed that

life is short, the path leading to eternal life narrow, the just man scarcely saved, the things of the world vain and deceitful, that all

comes to an end like falling water. She knows, on the other hand, of her immense indebtedness to God . . . that she owes Him every response of love . . . that a good part of her life has vanished . . . that it is already late to remedy so much evil and harm. Touched with dread and interior sorrow of heart over so much loss and danger, renouncing all things, leaving aside all business, and not delaying a day or an hour, with desires and sighs pouring from her heart, wounded now with love for God, she begins to call her Beloved and say:

Where have you hidden,
Beloved, and left me moaning.
You fled like a stag
After wounding me;
I went out calling, and You were gone (Stanza 1:1 *Intro.*).

The soul has gone out from self and from attachment to creatures. The search for the Beloved has begun. The traces of God's beauty and excellence which she finds in created things increase her love for him and her sorrow at his absence. The knowledge of him which she receives from other people only serves to wound her more sorely with love, and so she continues her complaint, asking God for the vision of his beauty and displaying before him the sickness and longing of her heart. The Beloved now replies by revealing to her some rays of his grandeur and divinity which cause her to go out of herself in ecstasy. In these visits, God communicates great truths about himself and at the same time adorns the soul with gifts and virtues. Her vehement longings and complaints of love now cease, and a state of peace, delight and gentleness of love commences. Although the bride enjoys so much good in this state of espousal, she still suffers from his withdrawals and from disturbances in the sense order, resulting from original sin. The embodied soul is unable to endure such an abundance of spiritual communication and would like to be all spirit in order to do so. The Bridegroom instead gives her tranquillity and peace, by healing the original disorder, conforming the lower part to the higher, quieting all irrational drives, and restoring reason to its rightful sovereignty. Having thus duly

prepared his bride, God brings her into the state of spiritual marriage, the highest attainable in this life.

The spiritual marriage should be compared not so much to the wedding day as to the golden wedding, when the partners have come through the crises and anxieties of love, and now trust each other completely without regard even for the tokens of love. At this stage, the will of both is one, the secrets and goods of both are a common possession. It was in this tranquil state of spiritual marriage with Christ that St John of the Cross learned the great secret of divine love and, like the prophets of old, carried the burden of its message for us.

'In bringing us to our goal, God makes use of nothing else but love. It was for this love that we were created, and so there is no better and no more necessary work than love. Just as love is the union of the Father and the Son, so it is the union of the soul with God' (*Sp. Cant.* 13:11; 28:1; 29:3).

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRECAUTIONS

THOMAS MERTON was fond of reading St John of the Cross even before he entered the Abbey of Gethsemane. After five or six years of monastic life, he realised the merit of St John's *Precautions*. He wrote in his *Spiritual Journal*, 'They seem to me to be the most detailed and concrete and practical set of rules for arriving at religious perfection that I have ever seen' (March 1947, p.40).

The *Precautions* are a programme for contemplative religious life. According to the testimony of Mother Anne of Jesus, they were written for the Carmelite nuns of Beas while St John was confessor there. But the gender throughout is masculine and this has led to the opinion that they were written for the friars of El Calvario where St John was Prior. As with the diagram of the Mount, he may well have made out similar copies for both friars and nuns. They are practical instructions, not a theory.

For what?

... if he wishes to attain in a short time holy recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness and poverty, where one enjoys the peaceful comfort of the Holy Spirit, reaches union with God, is freed from all obstacles incurred from the creatures of this world, defended against the wiles and deceits of the devil, and liberated from oneself.

St John is giving practical guidance to a young religious who thinks he sees his way to union with God and wants to reach his goal in a short time. The programme consists of precautions or warnings about certain areas where the beginner will need to

open his eyes a bit wider. The aim is to clear away the obstacles in order to attain recollection, to enjoy the peace of the Holy Spirit, and to reach union with God.

For whom? Does he mean only beginners? Yes, in the sense that he deals chiefly with obstacles to union. If a person has already arrived and attained poverty of spirit and liberation from self, there will be no need of a programme for the journey. The kind of beginner addressed becomes clear from the spiritual level of St John's language — holy recollection and spiritual silence, nakedness and poverty. He feels no need to test the moral or psychological condition of the beginner, but presupposes one who has been called by God to a rather intense form of recollection and who desires to respond with ready will to the challenge of a genuine contemplative life. For Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity 'holy recollection' is not an external separation from external things but a solitude of spirit, a detachment from all that is not God. 'The soul that aspires to live close to God in the invincible fortress of holy recollection must be set apart, stripped, and withdrawn from all things [in spirit]'. (*Complete Works*, vol.1, pp.96, 97). The addition of 'spiritual silence' seems to indicate a passive recollection as well. In an active sense, it means creating inner space for God. As St Teresa says, we must not have the house of our soul cluttered up with all kinds of junk when we are inviting His Majesty to enter. We must not get bogged down in mere earthly-mindedness. It does not mean less attention to obvious duties. The reference is rather to unnecessary items of thought or desire that have no bearing on our journey to God. In a passive sense, the temple of recollection is already built for the soul in which to pray. 'Sometimes, before they have begun to think of God, the powers of the soul find themselves within the castle. I know not by what means they enter in, nor how they heard the Shepherd's call' (St Teresa, *Interior Castle* IV M 3:3). The soul 'finds within itself a simple ascending movement of love to God, whatever creatures may do; it is invincible to things which pass away, for it transcends them, seeking God alone' (Bl. Elizabeth, vol.I, p.97 HF.3 Day:2).

Nakedness and poverty. In St John of the Cross, these words generally refer to detachment from heavenly goods rather than to the beginner's practice of mortification. His aim in the *Precautions* is to create a disposition of soul open to receive God's gift of himself rather than clinging to spiritual goods already experienced, spiritual consolations or divine favours of whatever kind. He is obviously addressing the contemplative. If we take contemplation to be the plenitude of God in his self-giving to the soul, then his precaution implies a corresponding emptiness or inner space for God: 'the place where one enjoys the peaceful comfort of the Holy Spirit and reaches union with God, is freed from obstacles and liberated from oneself'. The target therefore, is union with God which implies this peace in freedom from obstacles and from self-love.

The programme is threefold because the obstacles are threefold: the world, the flesh and the devil. The world is the easiest to deal with, the flesh is the last to yield, and the devil is the hardest to understand.

I THE WORLD:

1. *'Equal love and forgetfulness of all persons'*. The first precaution is directed against disordered or selfish love of persons, whether relatives or others. As a practical rule it sounds impossible. But it is a clear guideline for a contemplative-beginner's emotional involvement. It covers an important affective area where the fervent beginner might easily be deceived. St John himself loved his family tenderly, especially his brother Francisco. All the saints loved their friends and relatives. Their human relationships reflected their intimate relationship with God, were expressions of it and deepened it. But this state of perfect love did not come to them automatically. Natural love of relatives and friends has to be purified and perfected just as our love for God has to be purified. Any form of selfish love is an obstacle to union with God. St John is thinking about the beginner's freedom for recollection. His precaution seems to be directed towards any inordinate love or worry about one's family or friends, something that does them no good and may

show lack of trust in God. Any form of useless preoccupation hinders contemplation. The aim is perfect love for others, less emotional satisfaction or distress, less useless involvement on the journey to union with God.

The precaution does not want us to love our relatives less or fail in our duty of friendship towards them. It does not contradict the gospel precept in order to perfect the individual. St John's aim is clear:

the better to fulfil your duty towards them — regard all as strangers, do not love one person more than another, do not think about others' good or ill. Otherwise you will never attain holy recollection. If you allow yourself some freedom in this matter the devil will deceive you under the colour of good or evil in one way or another.

The aim is to preserve the beginner from an unreal world of petty friendships that breed tattered social relationships and preoccupation about apparent wrongs or injustices. It also confronts the beginner with the painful human truth that we must sometimes please people less in order to love them more. 'We must sometimes disappoint the world in order to save it, as Christ did' (Brother Conchuir, in *Religious Life Review*, July–August 1984, p.181).

2. Temporal Goods. The goal here is *silence and peace in the senses*. The obstacle comes from possessions of any kind: food, clothing, accommodation or personal comfort. When these good things become a preoccupation, taking in the mind the place that God should have, then steady mortification or what we might call penitential willingness to go without them is required. St John's mnemonic here is: *He who looks after the beasts will not forget you.*

Sometimes, in the case of fervent beginners, mortification itself becomes a preoccupation, a kind of uneasy anxiety to go without comfort. This might be a failure to break through to holy indifference and freedom from self and self-consideration. An uneasy anxiety to be the perfect servant of God is less Christian than the spirit of Childhood, practical trust in God and abandonment to his providence.

3. Community Politics. The contemplative life requires strong personal decision. The precaution here is therefore to preserve your independence. From the very beginning keep clear of taking sides. Now that you have learned something about the perfection of religious life, see that you do not apply this forthwith to the situation in which you live. There may be other things yet to learn. Do not become a judge in Israel too soon.

Many by not observing this not only have lost the peace and good of their soul, but have fallen and ordinarily continue to fall into many evils and sins . . . No matter how serious any of this seems to you — do not think about or speak about what goes on in the community, past or present, concerning any particular religious, his character, his deeds or behaviour. Do not say anything under colour of zeal or correction *unless at the proper time and to the right persons*. Preserve your soul in forgetfulness of it all. Even if you lived among angels many things would seem wrong to you because you do not understand them. So do not be scandalized. Lot's wife was punished for turning back. Do not turn back in thought but strive to keep your soul occupied purely and entirely in God. And if you do not guard yourself, acting as though you were not in the house, you will be unable to be a religious, no matter how much you do, nor will you attain to holy denudation and recollection. If you are not cautious in this manner, the devil will catch you out in one way or another.

The demand made by St John of the Cross in this precaution seems to be excessive. Undoubtedly he had his reasons for this. Perhaps because moral prescriptions are not much practical use unless they are absolute. Perhaps his own experience of community living showed him the extent of the harm that can be done by good-willed but misguided interference. Perhaps the precaution is a vindication of the eremitical spirit of Carmel if one is to reach the totality of self-giving. Individual calling or destiny must determine the extent of denudation or poverty of spirit required. It is well known that the great master musicians or painters with a view to perfect freedom of execution in their pupils, submit them to a rigorous discipline. Likewise St John, the great spiritual master of liberty of spirit,

makes what appears to be an excessive demand. He knew from experience the conditions required for perfect union with God.

II. THE DEVIL

St John introduces these three precautions by observing that the most common ruse of Satan is to deceive spiritual persons by the appearance of good rather than evil. He knows they will not choose a recognised evil. 'Thus you should always be suspicious of what appears to be good, especially when not obliged by obedience'. The three precautions are therefore arranged in view of God's plan of redemption, to which we adhere by obedience and humility.

1. *God's redemptive plan.* This means the obligations of your state of life. Apart from these never, without the command of obedience, take upon yourself any work, however good and full of charity it may seem, whether for yourself or for anyone else inside or outside the house. The actions of a religious are not his own. He has inserted himself into God's plan by his vows. So he has to be cautious about indiscreet zeal and must exercise moderation in works of supererogation. The precaution is a restraint on excessive good will rather than a deterrent from evil.

2. *The obedience of faith.* The devil does not understand God's loving plan in our regard. But, as the enemy of humility, he is a great meddler in the area of obedience. He tries to condition us psychologically so that we become victims of an attitude towards superiors which makes obedience unusually difficult or on the contrary so easy that it ceases to be supernatural. St John's precaution is directed towards personal liberation.

Watch therefore with singular care that you study neither the superior's character, his mode of behaviour, his ability or any other of his methods of procedure, for you will so harm yourself as to change your obedience from divine into human, being motivated only by the visible traits of the superior, and not by the invisible God, whom you serve through him. In this way the devil has ruined a vast number of religious in their journey towards perfection.

Nowadays there is a strong democratic bias against 'humble submission' and a servile spirit. Yet St Paul, referring to our Lord's obedience, begins by saying, 'He humbled himself and became obedient'. This has to remain the model. The wish of a superior can be a secondary norm for us in God's redemptive plan. It does not mean that superiors have infallible knowledge of the will of God. They must search for it in faith, and they can be helped in this by the community or by individual members. What we honour in obedience is the loving plan of God which we accept in faith as it is made known to us through our superior. Even St Paul, after his Damascus experience, had to have his inspiration authenticated and his eyes opened by Ananias, a person of much less importance than himself in the divine plan.

3. *Humility.* St Teresa referred to humility as the ointment for all our wounds. St John of the Cross in this precaution thinks of it as the great secret of happiness as well as the great barrier to Satan's interference. 'Ever seek with all your heart to humble yourself in word and deed, rejoicing in the good of others as if it were your own, desiring that they be given precedence over you in all things, and this you should do wholeheartedly. You will thereby overcome evil with good, banish the devil and possess a happy heart'.

III THE FLESH (SELF).

1. *Sensitivity* has the advantage of bringing with it a fine perception of spiritual values. But like a too sensitive radio, it can also pick up troublesome interferences which might play upon a person's mood and even distort his judgment. In the Third Mansions, St Teresa seems to think of it as a mixed blessing, and like St John of the Cross, she is concerned about its influence in times of aridity. But whereas St John discovers the roots of it in self-love, she finds them in lack of humility.

Whenever I hear people making so much of their times of aridity, I cannot help thinking they are somewhat lacking in it [humility] . . . It is much the same thing if such people are despised in any way or

lose some of their reputation. All we can hope is that they will not begin to imagine that the trouble they have is somebody else's fault, and represent it to themselves as meritorious (III Mans. Peers II: 222,225).

For St Teresa, the disabilities of the Third Mansions require God's healing intervention, either directly or through others. In this precaution, St John sees the religious life as a school of perfection, a training-ground 'that all may fashion and try you'. The community does us a service in this regard and we should not feel too sorry for ourselves in the process.

To free yourself from the imperfections and disturbances that the mannerisms and attitudes of the religious may cause you and to draw profit from every occasion . . . you must be as the statue to the craftsman who moulds it, the artist who paints it, the gilder who embellishes it. For some have to fashion you with words, others by deeds, others by thoughts against you . . . If you fail to observe this precaution, you will not know how to overcome your sensitiveness and feelings, nor attain holy peace, nor free yourself from many stumbling-blocks and evils.

2. *Constancy of purpose in time of aridity.* When the wine from the senses fails, keep your original purpose in view, realising that motivation from any form of self-love, even what appears to be spiritual, has to be purified.

3. In spiritual exercises *seek rather what is distasteful and arduous*. The senses are concrete and particular. They confine the spirit which, although it needs nourishment from the senses, pines for something the senses cannot provide. The spirit is at home only in the open, universal realm of God. Aridity liberates the spirit for this realm, and so St John adds: 'he should not run from the bitterness he finds in his spiritual exercises. Thus the senses are held in check. Without it you will never lose self-love nor gain the love of God'.

Conclusion:

From these final admonitions it becomes clearer what kind

of beginner St John is addressing in the precautions. But contemporary beginners in contemplation may wonder if his programme caters for a more individualistic piety than is expected of religious since Vatican II, with its concern for 'the world' and even its superficial interests. Although we are still at the mercy of various interpretations of the teaching of the Council, it is clear that the principal thing the Council expects from religious is their deep union with God. In no other way can 'the world' be saved. Man's greatest need is Christ. In addition, what the Church expects of contemplative religious today is a special kind of union with Christ,

. . . a very particular way of living and expressing the paschal mystery of Christ, death ordained to resurrection . . . so that, for the salvation of the world, they may be admitted to the intimacy of the ineffable conversation which our Lord has unendingly with the heavenly Father, in whose bosom he pours out his infinite love. Towards this apex the whole activity of the Church converges (*Venite Seorsum* I and III).

With this in mind, one has to agree with Thomas Merton's observation that the precautions are a 'most detailed and concrete and practical set of rules for arriving at religious perfection'.

ACTIVE NIGHT		PASSIVE NIGHT		UNION
OF SENSE ASCENT I	OF SPIRIT ASCENT II and III	OF SENSE DARK NIGHT I	OF SPIRIT DARK NIGHT II	SPIRITUAL CANTICLE LIVING FLAME
Mortification of the appetites (desires)	JOURNEY IN FAITH FAITH—Intellect HOPE—Memory CHARITY—Will	God's communication to the soul Purgation of vice TRANSITION TO CONTEMPLATION	Purgation of roots of vice TRANSITION TO UNION	Spiritual Marriage Spiritual Betrothal Simple Union
Death to sin (Baptism)	Life to God	Death to sin (Confirmation)		Life to God (Eucharist)
Good moral life eats to live	Theological life lives to God	obscure beginnings of the mystical life		mystical life proper

MAN
in
captivity
to sin

lives
to eat

GOD

CHAPTER THREE

PHASES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A COMPLAINT is sometimes made that we complicate the spiritual life by too many divisions. Why not return to the original simplicity of the Christian life when there was no mention of grades or stages of spirituality? Yet very early in the Christian centuries different levels of perfection were recognised. Some people honoured God from fear, others with hope of reward, and others from a motive of pure love. St Gregory of Nyssa distinguished those who avoid evil from fear of hell, those who do good in hope of heaven, and those who act only to please God and show him their love. The distinction of persons reflects the stages of development in individuals. St Augustine based his division on the virtue of charity. Charity, the essence of the spiritual life, has a gradual development. It is born, is nourished and comes to maturity. So for Augustine, holiness is initial, developing and perfect. St Thomas followed this idea and distinguished *beginners*, who strengthen themselves in charity by destroying sin; *proficients*, who move forward by the exercise of the infused virtues; and the *perfect*, who adhere habitually to God by conforming their will to his. This was the division St John of the Cross used in the three books of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the two books of *The Dark Night*.

Souls begin to enter this dark night when God, gradually drawing them out of the state of beginners [those who practise meditation on the spiritual road], begins to place them in the state of proficients [those who are already contemplatives] so that by passing through this state they might reach that of the perfect, which is the divine union of the soul with God (1 D. Night 1:1).

Note that the word 'proficient' has to be taken in its Latin sense of those who are advancing or making progress. To call them progressives might be misleading.

In a treatise called *De Triplici Via*, St Bonaventure favoured another terminology taken from the mystical writings of pseudo-Denys. The distinction of the three ways here is deduced from the different reactions of the soul, corresponding to God's ways of dealing with it. Thus we have the *Purgative Way*, in which the mind disposes itself to receive the wisdom of God by removing itself from sin and imperfection; the *Illuminative Way*, in which it is fired with love because of meditation on revealed truth; and the *Unitive Way*, when it comes to be directly enlightened by God. This terminology of three Ways is used by St John of the Cross as he begins his commentary on *The Spiritual Canticle*. As a division, it should cause little trouble to the reader, for its function in the architecture of the commentary is minimal. The construction of a mystical treatise has to follow the logic of love rather than the niceties of conceptual reasoning.

Since these stanzas [of the *Canticle*] were composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding, I cannot explain them adequately, nor is it my intention to do so. I only wish to shed some general light on them . . . For mystical wisdom, which comes through love and is the subject of these stanzas, need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul (Prol. 2).

What the reader of the *Canticle* has to keep in mind is not a neat division but the dynamism of a love that moves the soul forward to the spiritual espousal (illuminative way) and to mystical marriage (unitive way). The initial impetus for this movement is a wound of love, a very painful 'absence' of God, which impels the soul to go out of self in search of its Beloved.

In the books of the *Ascent-Night*, on the contrary, division is important. In different parts of his commentary St John is addressing different persons. 'In each of these books the reader must keep in mind the intention we have in writing. Failure to do so will give rise to many doubts about what he reads . . . We

are imparting instructions here for advancing in contemplation to union with God' (III *Ascent* 2:1-2). The phases of spiritual growth in St John of the Cross are not numerous, but we need to be clear which phase or what kind of person he addresses in any particular context.

We can recognise four stages, the sinner, the converted Christian (beginner), the spiritual person (proficient), and the deified or divinised or transformed person (perfect). We begin with the sinner. That is where the whole journey starts from. The habitual sinner does not worry about God's law or about spiritual things. Come some form of crisis in his life and he will undergo his first conversion to become an upright, reasonable person or a Christian enlightened by faith. St John of the Cross does not deal with the crisis of first conversion. He presupposes a Christian reader who has already given up sin and whatever would offend God, and who is not likely to revert. When this kind of person is resolutely converted to God, he will now find great satisfaction in spiritual things and he will prefer time at prayer in God's presence to all his former life-style. This new relish for spiritual things is not far removed from sense pleasure. In fact, God is helping this person in the sense order lest the attraction of evil lead him away as before. The relish he finds in spiritual things keeps him from going back. In St John's terminology he is now a beginner. If he is to move forward and become a 'spiritual person' (a proficient), he will need another conversion. He will have to deny himself or God will deny him his sense pleasure in spiritual things. This will be the crisis of the Night of Sense. It will be passive insofar as God withholds sense consolation, causing aridity or lack of pleasure in spiritual exercises in which he formerly delighted. It is active insofar as the person himself has to practise self-denial in good things as well as evil. He will have to forgo satisfaction in practices which formerly led him to God. This can be puzzling to the beginner who now finds he has to mortify himself in the very things that formerly brought him close to God. He will have a natural tendency to continue his original helpful method even though it has now become an obstacle. Through the crisis of

the Night of Sense he passes from the stage of beginner to become the proficient. He has reached the beginnings of contemplation and is henceforth moving on (proficient) towards union with God. In some cases — St John says they are few — God transforms the 'spiritual person' (proficient) into the perfect (the deified or divinized person) by means of a further crisis, the Night of Spirit. It is transformation rather than conversion. It means divinization of the soul's operation or activity of love and knowledge which have now become one with the love and knowledge of God.

The Night of Spirit has its active and passive phases. During this Night, the spiritual person has to deny himself the things of the spirit, just as in the Night of Sense he had to deny himself the good things of sense. To deny oneself the things of the spirit means to choose God himself in preference to the gifts of God, however exalted and supernatural these may be, visions or revelations, locutions or spiritual feelings. The fact that something comes from God, and is ordained by God for our spiritual advancement does not mean that it should become an object of attachment in preference to God himself. Normally, when St John addresses the 'spiritual man' he means one who is moving from the beginnings of obscure contemplation to perfect union with God. In Books II and III *Ascent* he shows how the spiritual person becomes the 'divinized' or transformed person *actively* by means of the 'divine' virtues, faith in the intellect, hope in the memory and charity in the will. In Book II *Dark Night* he teaches how the transformation takes place *passively* by means of a dark and painful contemplation infused by God. This is a kind of divine anointing of the soul in its depths, a radical healing of vice and imperfection. The soul does not know how this happens, but it afterwards discovers that it is on fire with a great strength of love. Nothing seems impossible to it in the service of God.

Importance of the Final Stage

Perfect union with God is the terminus of the spiritual journey. It therefore directs the movement of growth and

determines the conditions for each successive phase that precedes it. St John's notion of divine union characterizes his whole mystical doctrine and distinguishes it sharply from the pseudo-mysticism current in his day, as well as from some later versions of what the mystical experience should be. His writings give us sufficient understanding of this perfect union with God even if we cannot have the experience of it. Two of his comparisons are particularly helpful, the scriptural one of marriage, and the familiar comparison of the ray of light passing through a window.

The comparison of marriage. In marriage there is a sacramental union, sign of the union of Christ with his Church. This union always exists as long as the partners live. Another union is constantly growing out of this, a union of wills, a union of likeness. This does not always exist in the same degree. It remains in tension of development. When some difference arises in the ordinary course of living, one of the partners may find it extremely difficult to go along with what the other person wants. At this critical point the quality of their love has to change. To love now means simply self-denial, depriving oneself for the sake of the other of whatever causes this difference of will. Since our wills are so often at variance with the will of God, St John describes the quality of our love in terms of a similar self-denial: 'to love is to labour to divest and deprive oneself for God of everything that is not God'. Misunderstanding of the true nature of love can cause much aimless striving and fruitless suffering. St John realises the importance of being quite clear on the precise nature of divine union.

To understand the nature of this union, one should first know that God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially. This union between God and creatures always exists [like the permanent marriage union] . . . In discussing union with God, we are not discussing the substantial union which is always existing but the union and transformation of the soul in God. This union is not always existing, but we find it where there is likeness of love. We will call it 'the union of likeness'. The union of likeness exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the

one is repugnant to the other. When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and unconformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love (II Ascent 5).

In the state of divine union a man's will is so completely transformed in God's will that it excludes anything contrary to God's will, and in all and through all is motivated by the will of God. Here we have the reason for stating that two wills become one. And this one will is God's will which becomes also the soul's. If a man should desire an imperfection unwanted by God, this one will of God would be destroyed because of the desire for what God does not will (I Ascent 11).

The ray of sunlight. St John discusses union and transformation together. The marriage symbol highlights union. The comparison of the ray of sunlight emphasises transformation, and St John speaks of this comparison as an example that will provide a better understanding of his explanation.

A ray of sunlight passes through the window. If the window is not very clean the light will not illumine it perfectly nor transform it into light. But when the window is perfectly clean and polished we see light (through it) rather than the window itself.

If the window is totally clean and pure, the sunlight will so transform and illumine it that to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun's ray. Although obviously the nature of the window is distinct from that of the sun's ray (even if the two seem identical), we can assert that the window is the ray or light of the sun by participation . . . A man makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting his will perfectly to God's . . . When this is done the soul will be illumined by and transformed in God. And God will so communicate His supernatural being to it that it will appear to be God Himself and will possess all that God Himself has. When God grants this supernatural favour to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God as it was before (II Ascent 5:6,7).

Transformation therefore does not mean that the soul is absorbed in God. There may indeed be an experience of absorption, but the soul remains itself and has to exercise its own will, at least passively. It does not lose its personality or sign off its responsibility as a human being. It becomes more perfectly human because its will, united to God, participates in God's utter freedom and perfection. 'No spiritual writer was ever more on his guard against error than St John of the Cross. But no one ever more vigorously defended the liberty of souls on whom God is pleased to work' (Fr Bruno, 274).

The Alumbrados

The Mussulman dominion in Spain lasted nearly eight hundred years. When the Arab kingdom of Granada fell in 1492, the dominion came to an end but its influence lasted on. It affected the thinking of the people and their approach to the mystical life. Before the time of St John of the Cross a small religious movement originated in the dioceses of Cadez and Seville. It spread very rapidly and its advocates were later called *Alumbrados*, because they claimed to be always under the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The basic flaw in the teaching of the *Alumbrados* was the exaggerated importance they attached to mental prayer. They held that mental prayer was commanded by divine law and that by it all other precepts are fulfilled. Not even attendance at Mass or obligations arising from charity, or obedience to lawful authority should be allowed to impede the exercise of mental prayer, because the person would at that time be guided directly by the Holy Spirit and so would not have to obey any other law. Mental prayer accordingly was described as a kind of recollection in God's presence in which the mind does not engage in any movement of reasoning or reflection. There is no meditation properly so-called, no reflection on images, on the Passion of our Lord or on his humanity. By practice the person would arrive at a state of perfection in which the faculties would be so submerged in God that they could no longer act in any way. This person would experience a certain ravishment of

the Holy Spirit, an ecstasy of soul in which he would see the divine essence and behold the Blessed Trinity as the elect do in heaven. All the properties of beatitude would follow and the soul would be freed from the weakness incurred by original sin. Whatever it did would not be sin. Thus elevated, a man would not be acting from himself, but would be moved by the Holy Spirit. Obviously, this teaching could lead to all kinds of aberration in the moral order. The investigations of the Inquisition provided several accounts of lapses of this kind.

St John of the Cross always speaks cautiously about any kind of special illumination of the Holy Spirit. People advanced in perfection may suppose that it is more pleasing to God to have their guidance directly from heaven, since God sometimes grants their petition.

Yet the truth is that, regardless of God's reply, such behaviour is neither good nor pleasing to God. Rather He is displeased; not only displeased but frequently angered and deeply offended. The reason lies in the illicitness of transcending the natural boundaries God has established for the governing of His creatures . . . There is no necessity for any of this kind of knowledge, since a person can get sufficient guidance from natural reason, and the law and doctrine of the Gospel. There is no difficulty or necessity unsolvable or irremediable by these means, which are very pleasing to God and profitable to souls. We should make such use of reason and the law of the Gospel that, even though — whether we desire it or not — some supernatural truths are told to us, we accept only what is in harmony with reason and the Gospel law. And then we should receive the truth, not because it is privately revealed to us, but because it is reasonable, and we should brush aside all feeling pertinent to the revelation. We ought, in fact, to consider and examine the reasonableness of the truth when it is revealed even more than when it is not, since the devil in order to delude souls says much that is true, conformed to reason, and that will come to pass (II *Ascent* 21).

St John has been described as a touchstone for the problems raised by Spanish Illuminism in the sixteenth century (Baruzi). The high point of Illuminist teaching was its claim to have vision of the divine essence, to behold the Blessed Trinity as the elect do in heaven, bringing with it the absolute certainty

of being in the state of grace. This became a decisive norm for the condemnation of heterodox mysticism. Although St John deals with very exalted states of spirituality and recognises very lofty experiences of God, he never removes these experiences from the order of faith, however 'illuminated' they may be.

However elevated God's communications and the experiences of His presence are, and however sublime a person's knowledge of Him may be, these are not God essentially, nor are they comparable to Him because, indeed, He is still hidden to the soul. Neither is the sublime communication nor the sensible awareness of His nearness a sure testimony of His gracious presence, nor is dryness and the lack of these a reflection of His absence . . . If a person experiences some grand spiritual communication or feeling or knowledge, he should not think that his experiences are similar to the clear and essential vision or possession of God, or that the communication, no matter how remarkable it is, signifies a more notable possession of God or union with Him. It should be known too that if all these sensible and spiritual communications are wanting and a person lives in dryness, darkness, and dereliction, he must not thereby think that God is any more absent than in the former case. A person, actually, cannot have certain knowledge from the one state that he is in God's grace, nor from the other that he is not (*Sp. Cant.*, st.1:3,4).

Even in the highest phase of spiritual growth during the present life, one never becomes so 'enlightened' as to pass beyond the order of faith. 'If He comes to me I shall not see Him, and if He goes away I shall not understand' (Job 9:11).

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM MEDITATION TO CONTEMPLATION

PRAYER is an elevation of the mind to God. This famous definition of prayer first appeared in a work of St Nilus, hermit of the fifth century. The historian, Owen Chadwick, tells us that the book on prayer, written by St Nilus (or Evagrius?), uses very mysterious language. Part of it seems intentionally obscure. Some of the sentences are almost meaningless and appear designed as phrases for wordless prayer. The mind does not need words in order to pray. The author says,

The mind not only needs no words, it cannot attain if words remain; not merely evil thoughts and irrelevant thoughts hinder prayer but all thoughts. The soul must be stripped first of its passions, then of its thoughts and images. Make your intelligence dumb and then you will be able to pray.

This kind of language persevered down the centuries. In the time of St Teresa and St John of the Cross it took the form of a question: whether a person should think of nothing when beginning to enter contemplation.

St Teresa had read *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* of Francis of Osuna when she was twenty-two. It taught her the practice of recollection and led her on to the prayer of quiet. Twenty years later, at the time of her second conversion, she was reading *The Ascent of Mount Sion* by Bernardino of Laredo. In *The Ascent of Mount Sion* there is a chapter (27) entitled, 'What is meant by thinking of nothing in perfect contemplation'. The author says that 'in the secret pursuit of this business' no thoughts, however good, can be allowed to enter the way of quiet in perfect contemplation. He quotes a German Carthusian,

Henry Carlaab, who was an expert on the prayer of quiet:

O my soul, you labour much since you think of many things. Think upon one only and you will labour less with greater gain. I would even tell you if you are able and know how and are willing to do so, think of nothing and you will gain more without any labour.

To think of nothing (*No pensar nada*) became the bone of contention among spiritual directors in sixteenth-century Spain. Bernardino of Laredo gave his own interpretation of it:

In this thinking of nothing there is comprehended a great world, wherein perfect contemplation comprehends and holds within itself all that merits being desired. That all is God. It follows that in this contemplation all else is nothing and being nothing is no subject for thought. Quiet contemplation occupies itself in God alone, and by this I mean His love alone. A soul that contemplates Him thus is aware of nought within itself save the spark of love which is most living within it . . . In this most quiet manner of working there is only one who works and that one is the divine condescension, and there is only one who is worked upon, namely the soul that contemplates without natural aids, putting into operation no more of itself than a desire for God alone helped by His grace . . . and there must not be the slightest movement of the understanding or the natural reason.

St Teresa mentions the discussions she had with 'certain spiritual persons'. The matter discussed was, whether it is possible to suspend thought before God has begun to intervene, without more harm than good resulting. She answers clearly in the negative. 'Unless we perceive that the Lord is listening and sees us, there is no need to stand still like a dolt, as the soul would really do were it to force itself to stop thinking. In this case, its dryness would greatly increase and the imagination would be made more restless than before, in its very effort to think of nothing' (4 Mans. 3). She was very much against suppressing the activity of the mind in any way. She did not advise suspending thought unless the soul were already in possession of an alternative given by God. This was much the same as the teaching she had read in the 34th treatise of the

Spiritual Alphabet.

Impose silence on your understanding. Some authors reduce this exercise to the *no pensar nada* and thence arise doubts and questions. For this reason we may say there is no question of thinking absolutely nothing, but a withdrawing of our every thought from creatures in order to fix it on God with the gaze of faith. The soul is exercising herself directly in loving. It no longer seeks motives for loving, since it is already sufficiently persuaded that God is worthy of all its love.

Francis of Osuna presupposes long practice of meditation before reaching quiet prayer, for his appeal here is to the capital of thought present in the mind as a habit. This is also the teaching of St John of the Cross (II *Ascent* 14:2).

It should be known that the purpose of discursive meditation on divine subjects is the acquisition of some knowledge and love of God. Each time a person through meditation procures some of this knowledge and love, he does so by an act. Many acts, in no matter what area, will engender a habit. Similarly, the repetition of many particular acts of loving knowledge becomes so continuous that a habit is formed in the soul. God, too, effects this habit in many souls, without the precedence of at least many of these acts as means, by placing them at once in contemplation. What the soul, therefore, was periodically acquiring through the labour of meditation on particular ideas has now, as we said, been converted into the habitual and substantial, general and loving knowledge. This knowledge is neither distinct nor particular, as the previous. Accordingly, the moment prayer begins, the soul, as one with a store of water, drinks peaceably without the labour and the need of fetching the water through the channels of past considerations, forms and figures. At the moment that it recollects itself in the presence of God, it enters upon an act of general, loving, peaceful and tranquil knowledge, drinking wisdom and love and delight.

Thought therefore is not suppressed during contemplation, but meditation on particular ideas has been converted into habitual, general loving knowledge. This knowledge resides in the passive intellect, a scholastic term used by St John of the Cross to explain the nature of infused contemplation. According to the scholastics, the intellect as such is passive. It is like the

human eye. It receives whatever is presented to it. It is 'informed' by its object. The object is the active agent in the birth of knowledge. The faculty receives the form of the object, becomes 'informed' and thus understands. The human intellect, a purely spiritual faculty, needs to receive its objects of knowledge through bodily activity. For this work the scholastics postulated another faculty, the active intellect. This active or messenger intellect goes out to the imagination and memory for the forms of things to be understood. It searches for motives, runs through reasons and arguments and is therefore used in 'discursive' meditation. Whatever the active intellect brings home to the passive intellect carries the connotation of its origin. It is labelled, as it were, has a name and can be spoken about. But in the case of infused contemplation the person finds within his mind a God-given knowledge and love that has somehow bypassed the working of the active intellect. This new kind of knowledge has not come through the usual channel of imagination or bodily senses. It is mysteriously present, carries no label of origin and has no name. It is ineffable. In contemplation, God bypasses the active intellect, which should then remain quiet so as not to hinder the divine working. In that sense, the person should 'think of nothing' during contemplation. But this 'quiet' is not a blank. There is a new kind of awareness.

Since this new knowledge is not very clear in the beginning, St John gives two sets of three signs to indicate when the change is taking place: II *Ascent* chapters 13 and 14; I *Dark Night*, chapters 9 and 10 (more accurately, from chapter 8:3 to 11:2). The signs in II *Ascent* are for recognising when discursive meditation is to be discontinued. The signs in I *Dark Night* are for discerning the presence of obscure contemplation. It is generally held that both sets of signs refer to the same point on the spiritual journey but looked at from different angles. In both cases, St John emphasises the importance of meditation in its own place and time. Just as it is fitting to abandon meditation at the proper time lest it be a hindrance, so is it also necessary not to abandon it before the time. For although the work of the imagination and discursive reason is not a proximate

means to union for proficient, it is a remote means for beginners. The signs for discontinuing meditation are: first, the realisation that one cannot make this discursive meditation as before or receive spiritual satisfaction from it; second, a disinclination to fix the imagination on particular objects; third, the surest sign, a person likes to remain alone in loving awareness of God, without particular considerations, in interior quiet and repose.

Explaining the signs in II *Ascent* chapter 14, St John says, 'If a man did not have this knowledge or attentiveness to God, he would as a consequence be neither doing anything nor receiving anything'. Having left aside discursive meditation and lacking contemplation, he would have no activity at all relative to God. Yet St John admits (chapter 13) that actually in the beginning, the contemplative loving knowledge is almost imperceptible. One who is habituated to the exercise of meditation (which is of the sense order) hardly perceives this new insensible, purely spiritual gift, especially when he does not permit himself any quiet. The more habituated he becomes to this calm, the deeper will be his experience of the general loving knowledge of God. This knowledge is more enjoyable than all other things, because without the soul's labour, it affords peace and rest, relish and delight. Accordingly a person should not mind if his accustomed meditation fails him. He ought rather to desire that this be done quickly lest it become an obstacle to the gift of infused contemplation which God is bestowing upon him. Thus he will receive it in more peaceful plenitude and make room for the enkindling of love which this dark and secret contemplation bears and communicates to the soul. For contemplation is nothing else than a secret, peaceful, loving inflow of God, which if not hampered fires the soul with a spirit of love.

The question naturally arises, Are proficient, because they are beginning to experience contemplation, never again to practise discursive meditation? St John's reply is worth quoting.

We did not mean that those beginning to have this general loving knowledge should never again try to meditate. In the beginning of

this state the habit of contemplation is not so perfect that one can at will enter into this act, neither is one so remote from discursive meditation as to be always incapable of it . . . He will often find that he is experiencing this loving or peaceful awareness passively without having first engaged in any active work with his faculties. But on the other hand he will frequently find it necessary to aid himself gently and moderately with meditation in order to enter this state. But once he has been placed in it, he does not work with the faculties. It is more exact to say that then the work is done in the soul and the knowledge and delight is already produced, than that the soul does anything, besides attentively loving God and refraining from the desire to feel or see anything. In this loving awareness the soul receives God's communication passively, just as a man, without doing anything else but keep his eyes open, receives light passively. This reception of the light infused supernaturally into the soul is a passive knowing. It is affirmed that the person does nothing, not because he fails to understand, but because he understands by dint of no effort other than the reception of what is bestowed. This process is similar to God's illuminations and inspirations, although here a person freely accepts this general, obscure knowledge (II *Ascent* 15).

St John's verdict on the *no pensar nada* is clear. The soul thinks of nothing in contemplation not because it fails to understand but because it understands through no effort of its own, other than the act of receiving. God is the agent. The soul is the receiver and behaves only as receiver. Contemplation is a passive knowing. But the contemplative is not passive in a quietist, non-vital sense. He freely accepts the general, obscure knowledge. In *The Living Flame* (stanza 3), St John further explains what this free acceptance of infused contemplation implies. Far from making the intelligence dumb, the point of insertion for contemplation is the attentive mind, not the suppression of its act. This attentiveness is the fruit of former long-continued, loving meditation. It is a very simple form of loving attention. Meditation has moved by practice from the sense realm. It has become more spiritual and simple so that it can reach the level of a pure spiritual gift. Meditation has opened the eyes of the soul in love.

God secretly and quietly inserts in the soul this loving wisdom and knowledge without specified acts. The individual also should proceed

only with a loving attention to God without making specified acts. He should conduct himself passively without efforts of his own, but with the simple, loving awareness, as a person who opens his eyes with loving attention. Since God as the giver communicates with him through a simple, loving knowledge, the individual also as the receiver, communes with God through a simple, loving knowledge or attention, so that knowledge is joined with knowledge and love with love (*Living Flame* stanza 3:34).

At this stage a person should be very free and detached from all desire for spiritual experience, taste or feeling. He must 'let go' all attraction for the natural, human mode of working and stand his ground in solitude for receiving according to the supernatural mode of God. Even the loving attention of the transition point may have to be 'let go' in favour of the new phase of infused divine wisdom.

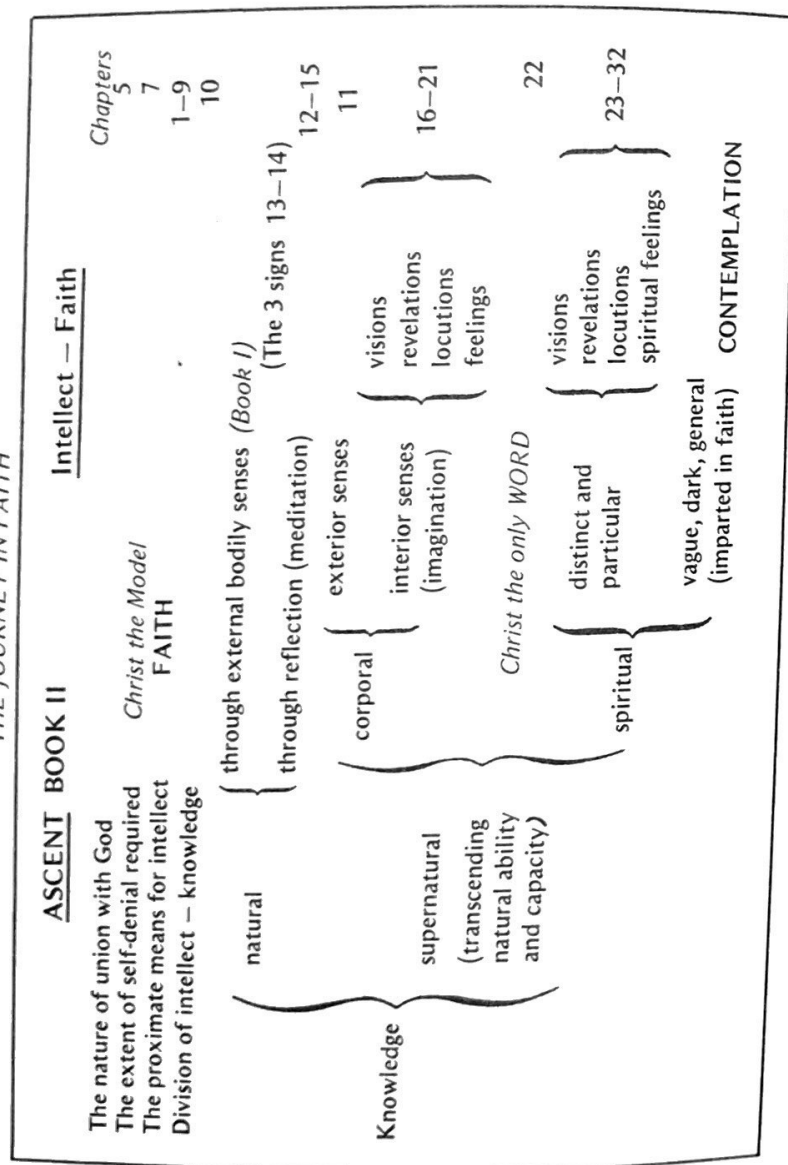
When it happens, therefore, that a person is conscious in this manner of being placed in solitude and in the state of listening, he should even forget the practice of loving attentiveness I mentioned so as to remain free for what the Lord then desires of him. He should make use of that loving awareness only when he does not feel himself placed in the solitude, or inner idleness or oblivion or spiritual listening . . . The more solitude he obtains and the nearer he approaches this idle tranquillity, the more abundantly will the spirit of divine wisdom be infused into his soul. This wisdom is loving, tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild, and an inebriator of the spirit, by which the soul feels tenderly and gently wounded and carried away, without knowing by whom, nor from where, nor how (*Living Flame* stanza 3:35, 38).

Note on Quietism

The term 'Quietism' which is often used loosely of any system of spirituality which minimizes human activity and responsibility, is usually restricted to the teaching of certain 17th century writers . . .

The fundamental principle of Quietism is the condemnation of all human effort. According to the Quietists, man, in order to be perfect, must attain complete passivity and annihilation of will, abandoning himself to God to such an extent that he cares neither

for heaven nor hell, nor for his own salvation. This state is reached by a certain form of mental prayer in which the soul consciously refuses not only all discursive meditation but any distinct act such as desire for virtue, love of Christ, or adoration of the Divine Persons, but simply rests in the presence of God in pure faith. As this passive prayer expresses the height of perfection, it makes any outward acts of mortification, almsgiving, going to confession etc. superfluous. Once a man has attained to it, sin is impossible, for then all he does or thinks is the work of God. The devil may, indeed, tempt him and compel him to commit actions which would be sinful in others, but when his will has become completely annihilated they cease to be sins in him; on the contrary, the man who has reached this state must carefully guard against being disquieted by such distractions, lest he should be disturbed in his state of mystic death (from *The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church*).



THE JOURNEY IN FAITH

THE classic text for a doctrine of faith is chapter 11:1 of the Letter to the Hebrews where it says that 'faith is the substance of things to be hoped for' (Confraternity translation), or 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (RSV). Originally the Letter to the Hebrews was sent to persecuted Christians, assuring them that their sufferings had a divine meaning. Their faith was a guarantee of the unseen realities for which they hoped. They were even told that the heavenly homeland to which they looked forward was in some way already present. They were even now living that wonderful reality and their sufferings would soon end in glory.

Some scripture commentators say that the meaning of the word 'substance' in the Greek world at that time in ordinary speech was something like title deeds of property, the whole body of documents bearing on ownership. For example, if a father gave his son the title deeds of a property which he could not actually enjoy until he had come of age, the son could say he possessed property. He had it in substance. St Thomas, commenting on this text of Hebrews said that it was not strictly a definition of faith, but it contained all the elements of a definition. He went on to explain: we are accustomed to use the name 'substance' for the first beginning of a thing, especially when the whole subsequent thing is contained in that first beginning. So faith is said to be the substance of things hoped for because the first beginning of those things is already brought about by the assent of faith. So if we wanted a strict definition of faith, St Thomas would put it this way: faith is a

habit of the mind by which eternal life is already begun in us, making our intellect assent to what we do not see. The word 'evidence' is taken rather for conviction or certitude.

St John of the Cross follows this line of thought when he says that faith is a habit of the mind certain and obscure. He gives a very emphatic doctrine on faith, preferring it to heavenly favours like visions and revelations. For he saw very clearly that 'this dark, loving knowledge, which is faith, serves as a means for the divine union in this life as does the light of glory for the clear vision of God in the next' (II *Ascent* 24:4). His mind focussed particularly on the content of faith, the glory and the light of the divinity. Despite his reputation for a 'dark night' theology, his treatise on faith is a doctrine of divine light. Faith, he says, is like the cloud for the Chosen People, which though dark in itself could illumine the night. 'Faith illumines and pours light into the darkness of his soul by means of its own darkness' (II *Ascent* 3:5). We are confronted here with authentic light, superior to flashes of genius or other kinds of spiritual illumination. The dark night of the Poem is 'more lovely than the dawn'. As in the Praise of Easter (The Exultet), the loveliness of 'this blessed night' comes from the fact that the Light of Christ has just overcome the darkness. One of the reasons St John spoke so much about faith was that its focal point is Christ, the splendour of the Father. In a brief commentary on Psalm 18:3, 'Day unto day takes up the story and night unto night makes known the message', he says:

The day, which is God (in bliss where it is day), communicates and pronounces the Word, His Son, to the angels and blessed souls, who are now day; and this He does that they may have knowledge and enjoyment of Him. And the night, which is faith present in the Church Militant, where it is still night, manifests knowledge to the Church and consequently to every soul. This knowledge is night to a man because he does not yet possess the clear, beatific wisdom, and because faith blinds him as to his own natural light (II *Ascent* 3:5).

The parallelism of the psalm brings out how the Word spoken in 'day' to the blessed (causing their blessedness) is the same Word spoken to us now in faith where it is still night.

A similar observation is found in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, chapter 83:

At the end of woe suddenly our eye shall be opened, and in clearness of sight our light shall be full. Which light is God, our Maker, Father and Holy Ghost in Christ Jesus our Saviour. Thus I saw and understood that faith is our light in our night. Which light is God, our endless Day.

The Second Book of the *Ascent* which St John says is 'most important for persons of genuine spirituality', shows how in the active night of the spirit the intellect of the contemplative is purified by faith so that it can be united with God. The whole book is a treatise on faith bringing us new insights into the nature of faith and its function in the active night of spirit. The nature of faith is made clear from the famous illustration in the scripture account of the soldiers of Gideon.

According to the account, all the soldiers held lamps in their hands, yet did not see the light because the lamps were hidden in darkness within earthenware jars. But when these jars were broken, the soldiers immediately beheld the shining light. Faith, typified by those clay jars, contains the divine light. When faith has reached its end and is shattered by the ending and breaking of this mortal life, the glory and light of the divinity, the content of faith, will at once begin to shine (II *Ascent* 9:3).

These words, describing the content of faith, are crucial for an understanding of St John's argument and for an appreciation of the whole function of faith in II *Ascent*, where obscure contemplation is preferred to all forms of particular knowledge, earthly or heavenly.

Even if the remembrance of these visions really does stir the soul to some contemplation and love of God, denudation, pure faith, and darkness regarding them will stir and elevate it much more, and without its knowing how or whence this elevation comes. Faith (divine light) is infused and rooted more deeply in the soul by means of that emptiness, darkness, and nakedness regarding all things, or by that spiritual poverty (which are all the same) (II *Ascent* 24:9).

Union with God implies that the soul must somehow reach a divine level. For the intellect this will mean divine light above all understanding. This 'excessive light of faith' will be experienced as darkness.

To be prepared for this divine union the intellect must be cleansed and emptied of everything relating to sense, divested and liberated of everything clearly apprehensible, inwardly pacified and silenced, and supported by faith alone, which is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God. For the likeness between faith and God is so close that no other difference exists than that between believing in God and seeing Him . . . Only by means of faith in divine light exceeding all understanding, does God manifest Himself to the soul. The more intense a man's faith, the closer is his union with God (II *Ascent* 9:1).

The divine light, because of its excessive brightness, oppresses and disables the understanding not yet prepared and purified. Hence there may be crises of faith, temptations against faith, trial of faith, night of faith.

A simple crisis of faith sometimes occurs when God's law and commandments become burdensome and an escape into 'intellectual difficulties about the faith' seems to be a respectable way out. Genuine temptations against the faith are more common. For example, there are many human supports helping us to believe: our parents, Catholic environment, books, music, liturgy, devout friends. In order to strengthen our faith, God sometimes removes some of these props. The result is a certain void or solitariness of faith, which might be a severe testing for the soul, a genuine crisis. There can also be a trial of faith like that of Abraham, who had it on revelation from God that through his son Isaac he would have a long posterity. Afterwards he was told to sacrifice this son of promise. The command and the promise did not tally. No human reckoning could have solved the difficulty. Abraham believed that there must be a divine solution which transcended his own ways of thinking. His faith was credited to him as justice. The night of faith occurs when a person has come through trial and temptation. God rewards this faith by deepening his companionship with

the soul. The darkness gradually thickens and all the former human supports are removed. Since the soul at this point loves God intensely and desires only him, this darkness, 'a wall reaching up to heaven', shutting out all apparent communication, is a very severe trial. The very perfection of the divine light oppresses the intellect with painful darkness and there is no other source left to build up the soul's confidence. Its guarantee and certitude have to come out of the darkness. The darkness itself becomes its light. This purification takes place in the passive night which is caused by God's direct action within the soul.

The active night of spirit is the soul's own conditioning of its spiritual powers by the exercise of the theological virtues. In II *Ascent*, St John treats of the purifying effect of faith on the intellect. In III *Ascent* he deals with the memory and the will in conjunction with hope and charity. The three theological virtues condition and strengthen our spiritual faculties so that we can approach God as he is in himself rather than as he is perceived to be by us. These three supernatural virtues are God-given powers precisely to divinize our natural spiritual operations, our thinking and our loving, so that we can embrace God in love. Union with God is the goal to be attained. St John always has this in mind and from it he draws his conclusions. He says very explicitly a number of times that for the intellect the only proximate means to union with God is faith. Faith is the only way proximately like God. Most of II *Ascent* is taken up with the proof of this, giving reasons why the darkness of faith should be accepted. The theological virtues are a divine equipment to meet the situation of intimacy with an incomprehensible God. The exercise of these virtues is man's only active way of opening the door to a divine intimacy. In fact, the door originally had to be opened by God. By the gift of faith it was opened for us in Christ. But man can choose either to retain his human way of loving and understanding, or he can opt for the new powers given him of understanding and loving in a divine way. This new way may puzzle him and he may feel uneasy or offended in his rational dignity when he cannot have explanations. He may feel

frustrated in will without any kind of clear objective. St John shows the extent of the self-denial involved, especially where there is question of an obvious spiritual good which is not God himself. The negation, he says, must be similar to a complete temporal, natural and spiritual death. 'This is a venture in which God alone is sought and gained. Thus only God ought to be sought and gained' (II *Ascent* 7:3).

A summary of this theme and of the whole book may be found in chapter four. It brings out fairly clearly what most people discover for themselves by trial and error: that there is no known way to an unknowable God. Just when we think we understand, then the way escapes us. The most that can be attained is the obscure encounter with God which faith alone provides. It is this obscure encounter that St John has in mind when he says that faith is the only proximate and proportionate means to union with God, that is, as far as knowing him is concerned. To advance towards God, then, a man must lean on dark faith and like a blind man 'accept it for his guide and light, and rest on nothing of what he understands, tastes, feels or imagines. All these perceptions are a darkness that will lead him astray. Faith lies beyond all this understanding, taste, feeling, and imagining' (II *Ascent* 4:2). St John reminds us that he is now addressing 'the intellect of the spiritual man, particularly of him whom God has favoured with the state of contemplation, for, as I asserted, I am now speaking especially to these individuals' (II *Ascent* 7:13; 6:8). This includes all those who for one reason or another, through visions or revelations, or simple experience of the spiritual life, might be tempted to think that they now know the way to God. They may even have good reason for thinking so, like Abraham who had God's authority for it. It is then that the difficulties and apparent contradictions become baffling and humiliating for human reason. In chapter four, St John points out the darkness of soul required for effective guidance through faith to supreme contemplation — title of the chapter.

The way of darkness, then, is specifically the contemplative way. It is the journey in faith. St John is careful not to suggest

or impose this way for beginners. The beginner, unable to be occupied in this obscure, general, loving knowledge which is communicated through faith must employ himself in the remote means, which is meditation. He must reflect upon particular ideas and images for the purpose of acquiring some knowledge and love of God (II *Ascent* 14). In the initial stage the soul is still attached to the senses and is only able to advance by their support. God respects this weakness and it is by means of these senses that he draws these beginners to himself. But when they have passed that stage and the journey in faith has begun with the beginnings of contemplation, he advises them to turn away in prayer from all particular knowledge, that is, from whatever can be picked up by the active intellect. They must turn away from anything that could be described as distinct, particular knowledge, and turn to a general loving attentiveness to God through faith, since it is through faith that the general, dark, loving knowledge called contemplation is infused.

The Holy Spirit enlightens the intellect according to the mode of its recollection and the intellect can find no better recollection than faith. Thus the Holy Spirit will not enlighten the soul in any other recollection more than in faith (II *Ascent* 29:6). Thus St John's whole argument is based on the principle that faith is the highest form of enlightenment, transcending all human understanding, taste, feeling and imagining, even that which is divinely communicated, if it be particular or distinct. A person must not rest on what he understands, or tastes, or feels or imagines. For if he does not blind himself to those things and remain in total darkness, he will not reach that which is greater. After chapter ten, the whole book (II *Ascent*) is constructed in such a way as to bring the soul right through all forms of knowledge, visions, locutions, spiritual feelings etc. to that general attentiveness to God through faith which is required for contemplation. Since transformation and union is something which falls beyond the reach of the senses and of all human capability, the soul must empty itself freely and perfectly of all earthly and heavenly things that it can grasp. It must

through its own efforts empty itself as far as it can and not rely on any kind of particular knowledge no matter how high or supernatural it may be. In this active night of the spirit the soul has its own work to do. 'As for God, who will stop Him from accomplishing His desires in the soul that is resigned, annihilated and despoiled?' (II *Ascent* 4:2).

A man is decidedly hindered from the attainment of this high state of union with God if he is attached to any feeling or understanding of his own. For however impressive may be one's knowledge or feeling about God, this knowledge or feeling will have no resemblance to God and amounts to very little. His goal transcends all this, even the loftiest that can be known or experienced. Consequently he must pass beyond everything to unknowing (II *Ascent* 4:4). Following this line of thought, St John makes a very important and helpful observation:

As regards this road to union, entering the road means leaving one's own road or better, moving on to the goal; and turning from one's own mode implies entering what has no mode, that is, God. A person who reaches this state no longer has any mode or method, still less is he or can he be attached to them. I am referring to modes of understanding or tasting or feeling. Within himself in fact he possesses all the methods . . . By being courageous enough to pass beyond the interior and exterior limits of his nature he enters supernatural bounds — bounds that have no mode yet in substance possess all modes (II *Ascent* 4:5).

These words of St John touch the very essence of contemplative prayer. It is simply a preference for the desert, the innate preference the contemplative has for emptiness and poverty.

One has begun to know the meaning of contemplation when he intuitively and spontaneously seeks the dark and unknown path of aridity in preference to every other way. The contemplative is one who would rather not know than know. Rather not enjoy than enjoy. Rather not have the proof that God loves him. He accepts the love of God on faith, in defiance of all apparent evidence. (Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, XV, p.111).

A loving wife will not be so concerned about the actual things

her husband gives her, but she will value and perhaps need these tokens of his love. God likewise gives certain tokens of his love, supernatural favours, visions, revelations, locutions, coincidences and 'signs' of his approval. But the real contemplative is not on the look out for these tokens. He would rather not have the proof because he trusts his God without needing the evidence. This is a necessary condition, a paradoxical condition for the mystical experience. Only when we are able to let go of everything, of all desire to see, to know, to taste or experience the presence of God, do we then truly become able to experience that presence. So contemplation is not a listening in silence and expectancy of any great intervention of God, but rather a simple, delicate listening, and suddenly God is there. The silence itself suddenly unfolds and reveals itself as a word of power, full of the voice of God.

Thomas Merton warns us against taking a quietist view of contemplative prayer. A person cannot become a contemplative simply by blacking out sensible realities to remain alone with himself in the darkness. One who does this of set purpose as the conclusion of practical reasoning on the subject but without a special interior vocation simply enters an artificial darkness of his own making. He is not alone with God; he is alone with himself. So the contemplative way is in no sense a deliberate technique of self-emptying in order to produce an experience. It is a response to an almost incomprehensible call from God, drawing the soul into solitude, plunging it into darkness and silence, not to withdraw it or protect it from peril, mortification or suffering, but to bring it safely through the suffering by a miracle of his divine power. So the contemplative way is the way of Christ, and contemplative prayer is a mystery of divine love, a mystery of personal vocation and free gift. This alone makes it the true emptiness in which there is nothing left of ourselves. An emptiness that was deliberately cultivated for the sake of fulfilling a personal, spiritual ambition would not be an emptiness at all. It would be already so full of self that the light of God could not enter.

ASCENT BOOK III III A. chapters 1-15			MEMORY (HOPE)
Objects of knowledge in the memory (1)	Harm from acceptance	Benefits from rejection	
natural (2) <div> <div>hearing</div> <div>sight</div> <div>smell</div> <div>taste</div> <div>touch</div> </div>	<div> <div> <div>things of the world (3)</div> <div>falsehood</div> <div>imperfections</div> <div>appetites</div> <div>judgments</div> <div>waste of time</div> </div> <div>the devil (4)</div> <div>hinders moral good (5)</div> <div>and deprives of spiritual good</div> </div>	(6)	Detachment
supernatural (imaginative) (7) <div> <div>visions</div> <div>revelations</div> <div>locutions</div> <div>feelings</div> </div>	<div> <div>deception (8)</div> <div>presumption (9)</div> <div>devil's interference (10)</div> <div>hinders union (11)</div> <div>low estimate of God (12)</div> </div>	(13)	Poverty of spirit
spiritual (14)	SUMMARY (15)		

THE CONSECRATION OF MEMORY

THE first fifteen chapters of III *Ascent* are an almost complete treatise on the function of memory in the contemplative life. Since the contemplative life is a life of love, memory has its importance. For when people love each other, to forget is unthinkable. Hence the contemplative life is an abiding remembrance of God. In III *Ascent*, St John is dealing particularly with the active purification of memory by the virtue of hope. Just as faith purifies the intellect, hope will purify the memory. At first sight, this does not seem easy to grasp. Yet hope obviously orientates the mind and does not allow it to wander away from its object. Hope consecrates the memory to keep it free for God. It leaves the memory dispossessed and empty for the one thing the contemplative really wants.

In chapters 1 to 15 St John first describes the perfect state, when the memory is completely taken up with God alone. From that he draws conclusions for proficients, whom he is guiding explicitly in this book, for it is they who have the task of actively purifying the memory. He then adds something also for beginners, describing a certain number of natural benefits that come from memory control. This whole treatise on memory is very helpful and easy to read, because the theological principles were already dealt with in his account of faith and the intellect.

We have already given instructions for the intellect, the first faculty of the soul, so that in all its apprehensions it may be united with God through pure faith, the first theological virtue. The same has to be done for the other two faculties, memory and will . . . It is

unnecessary to enlarge so much in our treatise on these faculties, since in the instructions given for the intellect (the receptacle in its own way of all the other objects) we have covered a great portion of the matter (III *Ascent* 1:1).

St John's aim is union with God in the memory (chapter 15). He is addressing particularly those advancing in contemplation so that they may consecrate their memory to God and so be united with him in memory. This will have to be done through the theological virtue of hope. Hope is concerned with something it does not yet possess. The less other objects are possessed the greater the hope for that 'something'. What a person has to do in order to live in perfect hope is this:

As often as distinct ideas, forms and images occur to him, he should immediately without resting in them turn to God with loving affection, in emptiness of everything rememberable (that is, of everything else apart from God). He should not think or look upon these things for a longer time than is sufficient for the understanding and fulfilment of his obligations if they refer to this. Then he should consider these ideas without becoming attached to them . . . But a man is not required to cease thinking about what he must do and know, for since he is not attached to the possession of these thoughts he will not be harmed (III *Ascent* 15:1).

St John is referring not only to useless memories — unnecessary luggage on our journey to God — but to all particular or distinct ideas, the remembrance of all things that are not God himself. This sounds rather devastating, and so St John puts in a timely warning.

The reader must keep in mind the intention we have in writing. Failure to do so will give rise to many doubts about what he reads . . . Observing how we annihilate the faculties in their operations, it will perhaps seem that we are tearing down rather than building up the way of spiritual exercise. This would be true if our doctrine here were destined merely for beginners who have to prepare themselves through these discursive apprehensions. But we are imparting instructions here for advancing in contemplation to union with God. All these sensory means and exercises of the faculties must, consequently, be left behind and in silence so that God Himself may effect the divine union in the soul. As a result one has to follow

this method of disencumbering, emptying, and depriving the faculties of their natural rights and operations to make room for the inflow and illumination of the supernatural (III *Ascent* 2:2).

In the journey towards union with God the proficient must advance by knowing God through what he is not rather than through what he is. It is a way of denial. The soul must be drawn away from its natural props and raised up above all distinct knowledge to supreme hope in the incomprehensible God.

Just as we have to put a cloud of unknowing between ourselves and God as regards the intellect, so also we have to put a cloud of forgetting between ourselves and creatures as regards the memory. This is what St John is helping us to do. The principle he lays down is the annihilation of the memory with regard to all particular knowledge as an absolute requirement for union with God. The memory cannot at the same time be united with God and with the forms of distinct knowledge, since God has no form or image that the memory could comprehend. St John appeals to the actual time of union. When in fact it is perfectly united to God, the memory has no form or figure. It is in great forgetfulness, without remembrance of anything. It is absorbed in the supreme Good. When the memory is completely full of God, it could not remember anything else. So the divine union is said to empty and sweep the fantasy clear of all forms of knowledge, elevating the memory to the supernatural order. Because of these touches of union in the memory, the soul remains at times in such great forgetfulness that it must occasionally force itself to remember something. These suspensions of the memory are more frequent in the beginning. Afterwards, when the soul has reached perfection it will not need force or struggle. Then God will remember for it. God's Spirit makes it know what it must know, ignore what must be ignored and remember what must be remembered. For all the first stirrings of the faculties in union are under the influence of God. St John gives an example:

A person will ask a soul in this state for prayers. The soul will not

remember to carry out this request through any form or idea of that person remaining in the memory. If it is expedient to pray for him (that is, if God wants to receive prayer for this person), God will move its will and impart a desire to do so; at times God will give it a desire to pray for others whom it has never known or heard of (III *Ascent* 2:10).

However, perfect union with God is not usually so continuous that a person's faculties are always moved divinely. But there are some who are very habitually moved by God and not by themselves. The works and prayers of these people are always effective. The supreme example given by St John is that of the Blessed Virgin Mary. 'Such was the prayer and work of our Lady, the most glorious Virgin. Raised from the very beginning to this high state, she never had the form of any creature impressed in her soul, nor was she moved by any, for she was always moved by the Holy Spirit' (III *Ascent* 2:10).

St John adverts to the fact that he has been talking about the state of perfect union, the effect of the passive night, and he admits that he has gone beyond his original intention. In this book he does not wish to discuss the divine effects brought about by perfect divine union. He is now talking rather to people who have by their own activity to move along from the beginnings of contemplation to perfect union.

Indeed, God must place the soul in that supernatural state. Nevertheless, the individual must, insofar as possible, prepare himself. This he can do with God's help. In the measure that he embarks, through his own efforts, upon this negation and emptiness of forms he will receive from God the possession of union, for God effects the union passively.

Drawing his conclusions from the perfect state already touched upon, St John gives his formal advice to the 'spiritual person', to the person advancing in contemplation towards union with God.

Do not store up in the memory the objects of hearing, sight, smell, taste, or touch, but leave them immediately and forget them, and endeavour, if necessary, to be as successful in forgetting them as others are in remembering them. This should be practised in such a

way that no form or figure of any of these objects remains in the memory, as though one were not in the world at all. The memory, as though it were non-existent, should be left free and disencumbered and unattached to any earthly or heavenly consideration (III *Ascent* 2:14)

The earthly and heavenly considerations provide the major division of the book. The first section (chapters 3–6) shows how hope perfects the memory by detaching it from earthly things. The second section (chapters 7–13) deals with hope under the aspect of poverty of spirit, which is detachment from heavenly things. Hope is a theological virtue, a gift of God, drawing the soul towards an infinite personal Good made known by faith. Hope is particularly the stirring of desire in that direction. It makes us desire the heavenly good rather than the earthly, thus detaching us from obstacles that hinder access to God. When we realise that it is only by God's gift that we are drawn towards heavenly good, we depend on him to provide the means to attain it. In other words, hope is a confidence in God's goodness and power. Hope, in its first aspect, perfects the memory so that it will not delay the soul on its journey to God by attachment to creatures. In its second aspect, it prevents the soul from relying on itself, or on any special favour it has received from God, or on the kind of life it leads, as the ground of its confidence for the receiving of eternal life. Its confidence must be in God himself alone, perfect poverty of spirit, spiritual childhood.

In addition, St John deals also with the natural benefits of memory control. In chapter 3, he points out how false our mental outlook can become and the number of imperfections we are liable to as a result of treasuring memories we do not need. These imperfections include waste of time, rash judgment of others, misrepresentation of situations, deception from the devil and unfitting ourselves for the gifts of God. In chapter 6, he lists the benefits of forgetfulness. *First*, the spiritual person will enjoy peace due to the absence of disturbance and change that derives from thoughts in the memory. Consequently, he will possess purity of conscience which is a great benefit. As a

result he will be disposed for wisdom. *Second*, he is free from many suggestions and temptations of the devil, because it is on these memories that the devil plays. *Third*, by means of this forgetfulness, the soul is disposed to be moved by the Spirit of God. Apart from these, even if no other benefit could come to a person through this forgetfulness than freedom from affliction and disturbance, that itself would be an immense advantage and blessing. For the afflictions and disturbances engendered in the soul through adversity are no help to remedy the adversity. Rather, distress and worry ordinarily make things worse and even do harm to the soul itself.

Clearly it is always useless to be disturbed, since being disturbed is never any help. Even if the whole world were to crumble and to come to an end and all things were to go wrong, it would be useless to get disturbed, for this would do more harm than good. The endurance of all with tranquil and peaceful equanimity not only reaps many blessings but also helps the soul, so that in these very adversities it may succeed in judging them properly and employing the right remedy. A blessing greater than all is tranquillity of soul and peace in adversity as well as prosperity. A person would never lose this tranquillity if he were to forget ideas and lay aside his thoughts and, as far as possible, withdraw from dealing with others and from hearing and seeing. Our nature is so unstable and fragile that even when well disciplined it can hardly fail to stumble upon thoughts with the memory; and these thoughts become a disturbance to a soul that was residing in peace and tranquillity through forgetfulness of all (III *Ascent* 6:4).

The virtue of hope, then, in a special way helps to unite us to God. It exerts its sanctifying influence by detaching us from earthly things. The magnetism of eternal life enters and lessens the power of earthly considerations. We perceive that 'eternity comes towards us with giant strides' (St Therese). The supreme Good magnetises the soul's energies and draws them away from sense pleasure and pride and wealth. Hope based on a lively faith shows us that all earthly joys lack both perfection and permanence. It makes us aware that our heart is too big, its aspirations too vast to be satisfied with earthly goods. God

alone possesses the fulness. He is the One who abides. Hope accordingly gives us a high consciousness that all earthly things are passing away and we with them. It makes us live in the spirit, longing for heaven amid the changing things of time. Sometimes hope is perfected by a special supernatural favour, as in the case of Saint Teresa:

His Majesty began to give me a clear sign of His presence. There grew up within me so strong a love for God that I did not know who was inspiring me with it. I found myself dying with a desire to see God. It was entirely supernatural, I made no efforts to obtain it. Nothing afforded me any satisfaction (*Life*, chapter 29).

Hope involves a total change in our concept of life. 'You are no longer strangers or foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints'. This implies a contemplative awareness of the eternal and a sense of the place eternal values should have in our present existence. Risen with Christ, the contemplative seeks the things that are above, where Christ is. This goes hand in hand with a profound conviction of the shortness of human life and wisdom of heart to see the hollowness of all earthly things, and the vanity of anything that does not carry us forward to eternal life. It is this aspect of hope bringing with it profound detachment, that St John is speaking about in the first six chapters.

From chapters 7–13 he treats of hope under its second aspect, poverty of spirit. The eternal horizon which so draws the soul is God's promise, and the promise is a revelation of his omnipotence and infinite goodness. A man responds by staking his life on the divine word, with an oblation of total hope and complete self-abandonment. In poverty of spirit, man's reliance for the fulfilment of the promise is totally in God. The emptiness of the memory then extends not only to all earthly goods but also to supernatural or heavenly goods, favours received from God. Whatever perfect life we may be living, whatever special favours we may receive from God, none of these sets up, as it were, any claim against God. The soul must seek nothing outside of God as a source of confidence for itself and its destiny. Just as in faith the certainty comes out of the very

darkness, so in hope the strength of its confidence comes entirely from God. St Augustine described poverty of spirit as the emptying out of a proud inflated spirit, that is, perfect fear of God. With this fear of God we no longer seek outside of him a source of greatness for ourselves. 'Merely to analyse the definition of hope makes us realise that spiritual poverty alone can assure its perfection' (Marie-Eugene). The virtue of hope attains God its first and principal object. It hopes for him because of himself, that is, because of his helping omnipotence. Hope will be more perfect the more it hopes in God alone to the exclusion of any other motive than God himself. St John wants to teach us the way to realise and to suffer this impoverishment or this perfect poverty of spirit that will set free the movement of hope and assure its full opening out for the attainment of true supernatural good, that is, of God himself. Only the path of nothingness which is total deprivation, perfect detachment and absolute poverty will lead to the ALL which is God and make certain our possession of him.

In the section on earthly goods, St John listed the various kinds of harm that come from attachment and the various benefits of detachment. So in this section on heavenly goods, he devotes a chapter each to five kinds of harm coming from possession in the memory of the forms or figures of supernatural goods, and a chapter (13) on the benefits from voiding the memory.

In addition to the tranquillity a person naturally enjoys when freed from images and forms, there is a freedom from care about the discernment of the good ones from the evil . . . One would be absolved from the drudgery and waste of time with spiritual directors . . . to discern the good apprehensions from the evil ones and to ascertain the kind of apprehension received. A person does not have to know this, since he should not pay attention to any of these apprehensions (III *Ascent* 13:1).

When the soul pays heed to imaginative apprehensions, it extinguishes the spirit which God infuses by means of them. The teaching therefore is, to abandon these apprehensions and behave passively and negatively, because God then moves the

soul to what transcends its power and knowledge. A person should pay heed not to the feelings of delight or sweetness, not to the images, but to the feelings of love that are caused. There are some supernatural images or feelings which are given precisely that by being recalled they may produce the effects of love. Then a person may recall them but only for the sake of moving the soul to love.

These are usually so imprinted on it that they last a long time; some are never erased from the soul. These apprehensions produce, almost as often as remembered, divine effects of love, sweetness, light, etc. because God impressed them for this reason. This is consequently a great grace, for the person upon whom God bestows it possesses within himself a mine of blessings (III *Ascent* 13:6).

The same principle is applied to spiritual knowledge which is without corporal form or image, knowledge of the Creator or of creatures.

As for knowledge of the Creator, I declare that a person should strive to remember it as often as possible because it will produce in the soul a notable effect. For the communications of this knowledge are touches and spiritual feelings of union with God, the goal to which we are guiding the soul. The memory does not recall these through any form, image, or figure that may have been impressed on the soul, for these touches and feelings of union with the Creator do not have any; it remembers them through the effect of light, love, delight and spiritual renewal, etc. produced in it (III *Ascent* 14:2).

Spiritual knowledge of creatures may be recalled when it produces a similar good effect, not in order to retain it in the memory but to awaken the knowledge and love of God. But if the remembrance of this knowledge of creatures produces no good effect, the soul should never desire the memory of it.

St John's whole doctrine of emptiness in the memory is based on the word of God, on the trustworthiness of God's promise manifested to us in Christ. It is the mystery of Christ in us, our hope of glory.

DIRECTIONS FOR JOY

ASCENT BOOK III (cont.) III A. chapters 16–45		WILL—(CHARITY)		
KINDS OF GOODS		Direct joy to God	Harm	Benefit
ACTIVE JOY – VOLUNTARY	temporal – riches, dignities children, relatives, etc.	18	19	20
	natural – beauty, intelligence, talent etc.	21	22	23
	sensory – objects of five senses and imagination	24	25	26
	moral – virtues, mercy, observance of law	27	28	29
	supernatural – miracles, prophecy, (benefit others tongues, healing <i>gratis datae</i>)	30	31	32
(17)				
{ painful { distinct { obscure – <u>passive night</u>				
spiritual { (33) (benefit self)				
{ delightful { clear { (distinct) { (35) { motivating { vague { provocative { (obscure) { directive { <u>union with God</u> { perfective				
		statues	36,37	
		oratories	38,39	
		recollection	40	
		places of		
		devotion	41,42	
		ceremonies	43	
		Pater Noster	44	
		preaching	45	

CHAPTER SEVEN

DIRECTIONS FOR JOY

THE second part of III *Ascent* (chapters 16–45) deals with the Active Night of the will, that is, the consecration of the will to God through love. Consecration of any faculty releases its full potential. From a first reading of St John of the Cross, one might get the impression that for him Christian discipleship means repression of our natural drives and tendencies -- the will must be purified of all its appetites. Yet this treatise on the Active Night of the will begins with the great precept of Deuteronomy. We are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength (Dt. 6:5).

This passage contains all that a spiritual man must do and all that I must teach him here if he is to reach God by union of the will through charity. In it man receives the command to employ all the faculties, appetites, operations, and emotions of his soul in God so that he may avoid the use of his ability and strength for anything else (ch.16:1).

Man is a complex of controlled energies, urges, drives, emotions, tendencies, moods. The Scholastics called them passions, because our moods are like illness. We suffer (*pati*) a change in our make-up that inclines us to judge the value of things according to the mood. Since passions and appetites are so often uncontrolled, spiritual writers sometimes speak of these passions, meaning simply disordered or inordinate appetites. The Stoics defined passion as *aversa a ratione contra naturam animi commotio* (a disturbance of soul contrary to our reasonable nature) which points not so much to passion as to its deficiency. This gave rise to the notion that all emotion, especially an emergency passion like anger, is a deficiency. For

the Scholastics, passion is God's good gift. We are responsible for the disorder. Moreover, an object desired by appetite might be good and right in itself but there may be reasons for preferring a better good. When man is led astray by this kind of good, he acquires what St John calls 'a lowly will'. 'The entire matter of reaching union with God consists in purging the will of its appetites and feelings, so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God' (ch. 16:3). What needs to be changed or destroyed is not the appetites themselves but the disorder in their working.

The strength of the soul comprises the faculties, passions, and appetites. All this strength is ruled by the will. When the will directs these faculties, passions, and appetites toward God, turning them away from all that is not God, the soul preserves its strength for God and comes to love Him with all its might. When these feelings are unbridled, they are the source of all the vices and imperfections, and when they are in order and composed they give rise to all the virtues. We shall discuss here the purification of the will of all *inordinate* feelings. These inordinate feelings are the source of unruly appetites, affections, and operations, and the basis for failure to preserve one's strength for God (ch. 16:2,5).

St John distinguishes four fundamental passions, joy, hope, fear, and grief. This was the traditional division in his day. It is still more or less accepted, even though many classifications of the passions have since been proposed. However, the Latinized form of the Scholastic terms may be misleading. The Scholastics recognised eleven elementary passions, grouped in four series. In modern terms, the first series may be expressed as, liking something, wanting it, and being pleased or delighted when it is possessed. For the Scholastics, the series was named: love, desire, joy. Since it was perfected in joy, the whole series received that name. Similarly for the second series, disliking something, feeling repugnance to it, and being depressed or sad when it is present. The Scholastic terms were: hatred, aversion, sadness. In both series, the objects are presented by the imagination and the external senses, which feed these mild

passions. Memory and instinct present the same objects under the aspect of being useful or harmful. They feed the emergency (or utility) passions. Hope for something pleasant or desirable creates a new energy. We feel courage or daring before the obstacles in our way. When the obstacles are excessive we despair. When threatened by something harmful we experience fear. When a disagreeable object is present and we resist it we are angry.

The passions are natural reactions in the presence of what is agreeable or otherwise. They often anticipate our deliberate choice. But they can be directed. When St John speaks about joy, he means an active joy over which we have control. 'Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Lk. 10:20). Not all joy is purely passive. We can choose. We are often led astray by our tendencies and desires, but we were destined to control them, and harness them for a higher good. When that is done, we rejoice only in what is purely for God's honour and glory, we hope for nothing else, we are sad or depressed about matters referring only to God, and we fear only him. The less strongly the will is fixed on God the more dependent it will be on created things and the more will these four passions reign in it. It will then very easily find joy in what does not deserve rejoicing; it will hope for something that will bring no benefit; it will be sorrowful about something that should rather be a cause for joy; it will fear where there is no cause for fear.

St John does not deal with the whole set of passions as he had promised. Perhaps he felt enough had been said to guide the reader through to the end. He is content with a treatise on joy, and even this is not complete. The treatise is systematic and the divisions of the material need to be kept in mind. St John's intent is pastoral rather than academic, but his style is that of a teacher. In this section of *III Ascent* the systematic presentation of his material shows more signs of his Scholastic training than usual. Yet many precious counsels are included. With their help one can move along with steadier step toward union with God.

Joy is described as a satisfaction of the will with esteem for an object it considers fitting. For the will never rejoices unless in something which is valuable and satisfying to it. The source of joy is always some value, real or apparent. St John divides his treatise on joy according to six kinds of good things in which the will may rejoice: temporal, natural, sensory, moral, supernatural, and spiritual. To each of them he devotes three chapters, showing (1) how we are to direct our joy to God in them; (2) the harm that will result if we fail to do so; and (3) the benefits from directing our joy properly. These eighteen chapters cover a vast field of the objects of human striving and rejoicing. Natural goods comprise beauty, elegance, bodily constitution, good intelligence, discretion and other talents. Sensory goods include whatever can be grasped by the five external senses and the working of the imagination and the other internal senses. Supernatural goods are the gifts and graces of God that exceed our natural faculties and powers, miracles, and prophecy. Spiritual goods are 'all those that are an aid and motivating force in turning the soul to divine things and to converse with God, as well as a help to God's communications to the soul'. Temporal goods include riches, status, dignities as well as children, relatives and marriages. Of these St John says: 'Ink, paper, and time would be exhausted were we to describe the harm which beleaguers the soul because it turns its affections to temporal goods' (III *Ascent* ch. 19:1).

But St John is not a pessimist about man's ability for true enjoyment. His whole treatise is an education in joy, both earthly and heavenly. He has much to say even about the temporal advantages of denial and detachment.

Even if a man does not free his heart of joy in temporal goods for God and for the sake of his obligation to strive after perfection, he ought to do so on account of the resulting temporal advantages, prescinding from the spiritual ones. By dismissing joy over temporal goods . . . he acquires liberty of spirit, clarity of reason, rest, tranquillity, peaceful confidence in God and, in his will, the true cult and homage of God. He obtains more joy and recreation in creatures through the dispossession of them. He cannot rejoice in them if he

beholds them with possessiveness, for this is a care which like a bond, fastens the spirit to earth and does not allow it freedom of heart. In detachment from things he acquires a clearer knowledge of them so that he has a better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them. His joy, consequently, in these temporal goods is far different from that joy of one who is attached . . . The satisfaction he finds in these goods harmonizes with their truth, whereas that of the attached man is in accord with what is false in them; he is gratified by the best in them, the attached man by the worst . . . He, then, whose joy is unpossessive of things rejoices in them all as though he possessed them all; another, beholding them with a possessive mind, loses the satisfaction of them all in general (III *Ascent* ch.20).

In the chapters on joy in moral goods, St John raises some interesting questions which he answers with great finesse and thoroughness. Can we rejoice in the fact that we have a well-ordered community life, that we practise works of mercy, that we observe God's law? Can we rejoice in culture or good manners? He replies: For what they are in themselves, moral goods merit rejoicing by their possessor, for they bring along in their company peace and tranquillity, a right use of reason, and actions resulting from mature deliberation. Humanly speaking, a man cannot have anything better or nobler in this life. Because of their nature and the good they humanly effect, a man can well rejoice in the practice and possession of them. A Christian, however, should notice that properly speaking he can rejoice in these goods only if he sees in the light of faith that they are leading him to eternal life. He ought to rejoice in the possession and practice of these moral goods only if he performs these works for the love of God. Through these good customs and virtues he should fix his eyes only on the service and honour of God. The value of his good works is not based on their quantity or quality so much as on the love of God practised in them. They are deeper in quality and power the more entire the love of God is found in them and the less self-interest concerning earthly or heavenly joy, comfort or pleasure or praise. St John teaches that a person

should not set his heart on the pleasure, comfort, taste, or other interests that these good works usually entail. He must recollect his joy in God and desire to serve him through these means. Through purgation and darkness as to this joy, he should in secret desire only that God be pleased and joyful over them, and he should have no other interest or satisfaction than the honour and glory of God. Thus all the strength of his will in these goods will be recollected in God.

For greater thoroughness, St John details seven kinds of harm from vain joy in good works or good customs. He adds that because this harm is spiritual it can be particularly ruinous.

The first is vanity, pride, vainglory, and presumption. For one is unable to rejoice over one's works without esteeming them . . . The second is that a person judges others, comparatively speaking, to be evil and imperfect, supposing that their deeds and works are not as good as his own. Interiorly he has less regard for them, and he sometimes manifests this exteriorly in words . . . The third is that, since they look for satisfaction in their works, they usually do not perform them unless they see that some gratification or praise will result from them . . . The fourth is that they will not find their reward in God since they wished to find joy, comfort, honour, or some other thing in this life. The fifth is failure to advance in the way of perfection. As a result of attachment to satisfaction and consolation in their works, some usually become discouraged and lose the spirit of perseverance . . . The sixth is that they are usually deluded by the thought that the exercises and works which give satisfaction are better than those which do not. And they have praise and esteem for the one kind, but disesteem for the other . . . The seventh is that a man becomes more incapable of taking counsel and receiving reasonable instruction about the works he ought to do, insofar as he does not quell vain joy in his moral deeds (III *Ascent* ch.28).

St John's main interest was in spiritual goods which are a possible object of joy for the will. Spiritual goods include whatever is an aid to turning the mind to divine things and to converse with God. They are also God's channel of communication with the soul. Spiritual goods are subdivided very care-

fully (1) according to the three faculties of the soul; (2) according to whether they are delightful or painful; (3) according to whether they are clear and distinct or vague and obscure. These subdivisions extend outside the scope of III *Ascent* and St John notes that some items of the subdivision are for later treatment. 'We will discuss the painful goods afterwards, because they belong to the passive night. The discussion of the vague and indistinct delightful goods will be left for the end, since they are pertinent to the general, vague, loving knowledge in which union with God is effected' (III *Ascent* 33:5).

THE DARK NIGHT, BOOK I: The Passive Night of the Senses.

		Chapters
	<i>line 1</i> (comment)	1
Necessity of the Night	Imperfections of beginners under headings of	Pride 2
		Spiritual avarice 3
		Spiritual lust 4
		Anger 5
		Spiritual Gluttony 6
		Envy, Sloth 7
	<i>line 1</i> (explained)	8
When it begins	The three signs of contemplation	9
Conduct of the soul	in the aridity of the Night	10
	<i>line 2, 3, 4</i> (explained)	11
Benefits of the Night	(continued in 'other benefits')	12, 13
How long it lasts	<i>line 5</i> (explained)	14

CHAPTER EIGHT

DARK NIGHT I: THE PASSIVE NIGHT OF THE SENSES

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS begins his treatise on the dark night with a prayer: 'May God be pleased to give me His divine light that I may say something worthwhile about this subject, for it is a night so dark and a matter so difficult to treat and expound, His enlightenment is very necessary' (*I Dark Night* 7:5). Already in the Prologue to the *Ascent*, he had said that the trials and darkness encountered on the way to perfection are so numerous and profound that human science cannot understand them adequately 'nor does experience of them equip one to explain them. He who suffers them will know what the experience is like but he will find himself unable to describe it'. St John himself certainly had a profound experience of the night, and no one has so well described it. One thinks especially of his time in the Toledo prison in 1578. But during that time he was composing thirty-one stanzas of *The Spiritual Canticle*, which he completed afterwards. It was only in the year following his release that he wrote the poem of *The Dark Night*, a fact which influenced the character of his commentary. 'Before embarking upon an explanation of these stanzas, we should remember that the soul recites them when it has already reached the state of perfection — that is, union with God through love' (Prol. *Dark Night*). The commentary was written between 1582 and 1585, when he was in Granada. The book immediately became popular, even more so than his other works, so that *The Dark Night* became associated with the name of John of the Cross, even as it is today.

Fr Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen says that the doctrine of the Night as a means to union of love with God was perhaps dearer to St John than all other doctrines, and constitutes one of his more personal and more appealing discoveries. Of course,

the idea of spiritual darkness was often used by writers before and during St John's lifetime. Francis of Osuna used the metaphor of night but thought of it as punitive rather than as a means to the union of love with God. Balthasar refers to Denys the Areopagite as the father of the strictest negative theology, and couples him with St John of the Cross: 'the two theologians who relied most consistently on the apophatic method can be considered the two most decidedly aesthetic theologians of Christian history' (*The Glory of the Lord*, I, p.40,125). Denys was a Syrian monk of the fifth century who wrote three famous works, *The Celestial Hierarchies*, *The Divine Names*, and *Mystical Theology*. In the beginning of his *Mystical Theology*, he addresses a certain Timothy:

Do thou then in the intense practice of mystical contemplation leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things which are not and things which are, and strain upwards in unknowing as far as may be towards the union with Him who is above all things and knowledge, abandoning and set free from all thou shalt be borne up to the ray of divine darkness which surpasses all being.

Denys enjoyed a great vogue down the centuries, partly because of his supposed discipleship of St Paul and partly because of his mystical terminology which subsequent writers found convenient. How much St John of the Cross was indebted to him is not clear. John of Jesus Mary gave evidence that he saw St John reading Denys, and St John, who seldom quotes authors by name, refers to Denys and to the ray of divine darkness. Recent opinion among Carmelite scholars is that the dark night symbol of obscure contemplation is anterior to the time of Denys (*St John of the Cross*, Fr Ephrem of the Mother of God, Saragossa 1947). It is found in Gregory of Nyssa and in Origen and is inspired by the Song of Songs, St John's favourite book. 'Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves. I sought him but found him not. I called him but he gave no answer, and rising I went out into the city, in the streets and in the squares, to seek him whom my soul loves. I sought him but I found him not' (Song 3:1). St John's source

was primarily biblical. His frequent references to the psalms may indicate that the psalter was his favourite prayer book, its many 'passion psalms' providing the only appropriate communication line in the depths of the night. 'I call for help by day, I cry at night before you. You have laid me in the depths of the tomb, in places that are dark in the depths. Your anger weighs down upon me' (Ps. 87).

As a mystic writing from experience, St John was well aware of how painful the excessive brightness of God could be for unpurified human faculties. But his symbol of 'night' was used to indicate mystery rather than suffering. What he shows us particularly in *The Dark Night* is that 'the thick darkness wherein the soul is enveloped . . . hides the precious working whereby the divine mercy completes in it the transformation of love' (Fr Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen). The poem of *The Dark Night* celebrates the mystery rather than complains of it. The first two stanzas proclaim the effects of the two kinds of purification, of sense and of spirit. The remaining six stanzas rejoice in the marvellous benefits of spiritual illumination and union of love. Even the first two stanzas which speak of purification are really a form of thanksgiving for the 'sheer grace' of being able to go out from self, 'in darkness and security' to the sublime and joyous union with God (Prol. *Dark Night*).

For St John, 'dark night' was a convenient metaphor for the whole journey to eternal life. Just as the human eye, deprived of light, or blinded by excessive light, is in darkness, so the other faculties deprived of their proper objects are in a similar position. There may be darkness in the intellect, aridity in the will, affliction in the memory, loneliness or emptiness in the interior senses, deprivation of one kind or another in the exterior senses, mortification of the appetites etc. All come under the same image. They are all features of a departure from disordered self-love. They cause the soul to die to itself and to all things in order to begin the sweet and delightful life of love with God. The departure from self takes place in a dark night, but it is a 'night more lovely than the dawn. Night that has united the Lover with His beloved, Transforming the

beloved in her Lover' (stanza 5).

In the books of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* the image of night covers the soul's own efforts. In *The Dark Night* it has a new dimension. The dark night here 'signifies purgative contemplation, which passively causes in the soul this negation of self and of all things' (*Dark Night I*, explanation). The mysterious working of God has entered the soul, which is now enfolded in the divine light and love. Infused contemplation has begun its work in the soul secretly. The purifying process is gradual, in accordance with human nature. There are two nights or purifications. The first affects the sensitive part of the soul; the second the spiritual part. Both must be purified if they are to be 'divinized' for union with God. This corresponds to the two stages of the spiritual life, beginners and proficients.

This night, which we say is contemplation, causes two kinds of darkness or purgation in spiritual persons according to the two parts of the soul, the sensory and the spiritual. Hence the one night or purgation will be sensory, by which the senses are purged and accommodated to the spirit; the other night or purgation will be spiritual, by which the spirit is purged and denuded as well as accommodated and prepared for union with God through love (*I Dark Night 8:1*).

The first night introduces beginners to the state of contemplation; the second night takes place in those who are already proficient, at the time God desires to lead them into the state of union (*I Ascent 2:3*). The sensory night is common and happens to many; these are the beginners. The spiritual night is the lot of very few, of those who have been tried and are proficient. The first purgation or night, St John says, is bitter and terrible to the senses. But nothing can be compared to the second, for it is horrible and frightful to the spirit.

Sense and Spirit

What does St John mean by the sensory and the spiritual parts of the soul? The soul is a simple, spiritual substance and has no parts. But it has many different powers. For the use of these powers, the bodily or sense life is more or less involved.

When a person is engaged in some spiritual activity he has to depend upon senses, imagination, memory etc., as in meditation. The object of this activity is spiritual. Philosophers would distinguish it from sense activity. The mystics, however, use a slightly different terminology, as a result of their own experience. Sometimes in the experience of union with God, a person may be conscious of very deep peace in his inner true self, and at the same time suffer a tumult of conflicting images, reasons, outlooks in his superficial self. This experience has led the mystics to distinguish two regions of the soul, rather than two powers or faculties; the realm of sense and the realm of spirit. Sense includes imagination, memory, reasoning, as these are employed in meditation. Spirit comprises purely intellectual operation, intuition, contemplation, basic will and love. It is according to this terminology that St John distinguishes the night of sense and the night of spirit.

Active and Passive Nights

The night of sense normally precedes the night of spirit. But both nights have an active and a passive phase, which are not in sequence but run concurrently. The active night must keep pace with the work that God is accomplishing passively in the soul. Some writers speak of a preparatory phase to the active night of sense. The soul retains the initiative, directing its own mortification of appetites and desires etc. God has not yet intervened directly. But when the active and passive nights progress simultaneously God gradually takes over the direction of the spiritual life. He takes away the initiative of the soul, bringing it into submission to his own direct action. Then the active night and the passive night must complete each other. The first book of the *Ascent* and the first book of *The Dark Night* go together. The passive night, being God's work, is the more important. The soul must actively try to respond to its demands. It is this active response that St John has in mind in the first book of the *Ascent*. He is dealing with 'beginners at the time God commences to introduce them into the state of contemplation' (*I Ascent 1:3*). This helps us to understand

the absolute character of some of the 'counsels and rules' of I *Ascent* 13 and guides us in their practical application.

In order to understand (apply?) the teaching of the *Ascent* . . . one must be at least a beginner in contemplation. It is for such beginners and for those progressing in the way of contemplation that the treatise was written . . . Beginners with a certain experimental knowledge of the purity of God and the demands He makes of His friends, find in the austerity of St John their spiritual climate (Marie-Eugene, vol.II, p.127).

The first chapters of the *Ascent* are a description of the soul's failure to find fulfilment in anything less than the Absolute. It becomes weary and tired from following its desires. Its habitual state is one of discontent (tormented and afflicted). It can no longer see its way clearly (darkened and blinded). From its contact with imperfection it becomes defiled and stained. It may even reach the point where it can no longer change (weakened and lukewarm). Because of too much seeking for gratification, the personality disintegrates and becomes incapable of loving properly. The first chapters of *The Dark Night*, on the contrary, deal with a soul that has really begun to love God. Its fervent spiritual life reads like a success story. To correct this impression, St John gives his famous chapters on the imperfections of beginners. The devastating character of these chapters was not St John's attempt to deflate the proud spirit of the beginner. The ideas, and even the same words, are found in the *Institutions* of Tauler. They were used by St John chiefly to show the great need for the passive night, for purification at the hands of God.

Nature and Cause of the Night of Sense

Chapter 8 deals with souls who have practised the virtues for some time and have persevered in prayer. Through the sweetness and pleasure they find in these exercises, they have lost their love for the things of the world and have gained some degree of strength. They are now able to suffer a light burden and a little aridity without turning back. Yet their conduct

apparently so perfect is only a beginning and needs the loving intervention of God.

Since the conduct of these beginners in the way of God is lowly and not too distant from love of self and pleasure (as was explained in the first seven chapters), God desires to withdraw them from this base manner of loving and lead them to a higher degree of divine love. And He desires to liberate them from the lowly exercise of the senses and of discursive meditation, by which they go in search of Him so inadequately and with so many difficulties, and lead them into the exercise of the spirit, in which they become capable of a communion with God that is more abundant and free from imperfections . . . When they are going about their spiritual exercises with delight and satisfaction, when in their opinion the sun of divine favour is shining most brightly upon them, God darkens all this light and closes the door and spring of the sweet spiritual water they were tasting as often and as long as they desired. God now leaves them in such darkness that they do not know which way to turn in their discursive imaginings; they cannot advance a step in meditation as they used to, now that the interior sensory faculties are engulfed in this night. He leaves them in such dryness that they not only fail to receive satisfaction and pleasure from their spiritual works and exercises, but also find these exercises distasteful and bitter (I *Dark Night* 8:3).

This description of the dark night leaves us in no doubt about its origin. Its cause is the divine action within the soul, God's 'divine cure'. Although it is a passive and painful experience, the person should strive to do his part in purifying himself so as to merit the divine cure. God will heal him of what through his own efforts he is unable to remedy. No one can purify himself sufficiently to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union. God must take over. But the soul must continue in faithfulness and persevering love in spite of the darkness. Obscure purgative contemplation implements the soul's active efforts. It passively causes a deeper denial of self and imparts vigour and warmth of love. It supplants the love of creatures with another and more powerful love. It causes the soul to die to self and to 'begin the sweet and delightful love of God'.

St John's description is largely psychological. What happens theologically is that God communicates himself to the superior part of the soul, supplying it and the theological virtues residing there the sustenance and support they formerly found in the operations of the senses. All our spiritual activity, having God for its object, must be rooted in the theological virtues. Faith is the root of justification. In order to grow, this faith must be 'lodged in the womb of reason'. Faith develops *humanly* by the exercise of our natural faculties, imagination, memory and reason. The mutual interchange brings spiritual satisfaction to the soul. In infused contemplation God decides to nourish the theological virtues *divinely*. He binds the interior powers of the soul, making them independent of those that are exterior, and submitting them to his own direction. St Teresa uses the phrase, 'It holds our love so bound that it doesn't allow it the freedom during that time to love anything else but you' (*Life* 14:2). This 'ligature' or isolation of the superior part deprives the senses of the direction they enjoyed from the intellectual faculties. The senses are not yet adapted for this new communication of God and on that account suffer in the process. But the benefits of a direct self-communication of God outweigh all psychological considerations.

Benefits of the Night of Sense

The passive night of sense is at first a painful experience. St John hastens to dispel the apprehensions of the beginner: 'For it will please and comfort one who treads this path to know that a way seemingly so rough and adverse and contrary to spiritual gratification engenders so many blessings'. All the blessings are summed up in these four: the delight of peace; a habitual remembrance of God and solicitude concerning him; cleanness and purity of soul; and the practice of virtue (*I Dark Night* 13:6). Considering the many benefits of the night, its trials and aridities are no great tragedy.

A person should not mind if his faculties are being lost to him; he ought to desire rather that this be done quickly so that he may

be no obstacle to the operation of infused contemplation which God is bestowing, that he may receive it with more peaceful plentitude and make room in his spirit for the enkindling and burning of the love that this dark and secret contemplation bears and communicates to his soul. For contemplation is nothing else than a secret and peaceful and loving inflow of God which, if not hampered, fires the soul in the spirit of love (*I Dark Night* 10:6).

At first, the fire of love is not a very conscious experience but gradually the soul becomes aware of being drawn by the love of God and 'fired with love's urgent longings', without knowing how or where this drawing of love originates (*I Dark Night* 11:1).

The consequence of love's urgent longings is: 'I went out unseen'. This going out refers to the subjection the soul had to its senses in seeking God in meditation. The purely human operations in comparison to infused contemplation were feeble, limited and exposed to error. At every step the soul stumbled into innumerable imperfections and much ignorance (*ibid.* 11:4). Through the aridities of the night the senses become adapted or accommodated to the action of God in the spirit. This peace means that there is a new kind of awareness of God's presence in the centre of the soul because of an overflowing of sweetness to all the faculties. The soul is liberated from sense bondage in its prayer and has become what St John calls 'a spiritual person'. This is the essential effect of the passive night of sense.

In addition to the essential effect of the night of sense, there are many particular benefits, corresponding roughly to the list of imperfections given in the first seven chapters.

The first and chief (particular) benefit that this dark night of contemplation causes is the knowledge of self and one's own misery . . . The aridities and voids of the faculties in relation to the abundance previously experienced, and the difficulty encountered in the practice of virtue make the soul recognise its own lowliness and misery, which was not apparent in the time of its prosperity. When it was walking in festivity, gratification, consolation and support in God, it was more content, believing that it was serving God in some way . . . Now that the soul is clothed in these other garments of labour, dryness, and desolation, and that its former lights have been darkened, it possesses more authentic light . . . It considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in self . . . God esteems

this lack of self-satisfaction and the dejection a person has about not serving Him, more than all its former deeds and gratifications, however notable they may have been (*I Dark Night* 12:2).

The authentic light on 'self' is accompanied by a new awareness of the greatness and transcendence of God. From this twofold light the soul learns how to pray. 'A person communes with God more respectfully and courteously, the way one should always converse with the Most High. In the prosperity of satisfaction and consolation the beginner did not act thus, for that satisfying delight made him somewhat more daring with God than was proper, and more discourteous and inconsiderate' (*ibid.* 12:3). The same considerateness also characterises his attitude to others. Aware of his own wretchedness, he is not even tempted to think he is more advanced than others. He esteems others and does not judge them as before. He is so constantly confronted with his own misery that he will have no desire to watch anyone else's conduct. He will 'even desire to be directed and told what to do by anyone at all'.

In this arid night solicitude for God and yearnings about serving him increase.

The soul bears a habitual remembrance of God, accompanied by a fear and dread of turning back on the spiritual road. This is a notable benefit and by no means one of the least in this dryness and purgation of appetite.

Besides these benefits, innumerable others flow from this dry contemplation. In the midst of these aridities and straits, God frequently communicates to the soul, when it least expects, spiritual sweetness, a very pure love, and a spiritual knowledge which is sometimes most delicate. Each of these communications is more valuable than all that the soul previously sought. Yet in the beginning one will not think so, because the spiritual inflow is very delicate and the senses do not perceive it (*I Dark Night* 13:4).

Duration of the Night of Sense

The passive night of sense begins with the contemplation that causes it. It covers the entire period of transition from meditation to contemplation. The senses remain empty and dry in the passive night because they have no capacity for the purely spiritual gift of contemplation. This incapacity of the

senses is the cause of the suffering, and they remain in this state of dreary distaste until they have been purified sufficiently to partake of the pure divine gift bestowed upon the spirit. When the work of adaptation is completed the night of sense comes to a close. The soul is able to 'go out' along the road of the spirit.

When this house of the senses was stilled (that is, mortified), its passions quenched, and its appetites calmed and put to sleep through this happy night of the purgation of the senses, the soul went out in order to begin its journey along the road of the spirit, which is that of proficients . . . or the way of infused contemplation, in which God Himself pastures and refreshes the soul without any of its own discursive meditation or active help (*I Dark Night* 14).

How long the soul remains in the passive night of sense cannot be calculated precisely. The trials and temptations are not identical in each case and their length and intensity vary. For the whole process depends upon the greater or lesser amount of imperfection to be purged and the degree of love to which God wills to raise the soul. In accordance with these two considerations God humbles the soul with greater or lesser intensity, and for a longer or shorter time.

But those who are very weak He keeps in this night for a long time. Their purgation is less intense and their temptations abated, and He frequently refreshes their senses to keep them from backsliding. They arrive at the purity of perfection late in life. And some of them never reach it. Although they do not advance, God exercises them for short periods and on certain days in those temptations and aridities to preserve them in humility and self-knowledge, and at other times and seasons He comes to their aid with consolation, lest through loss of courage they return to their search after worldly consolation (*ibid.* 14:5).

The length of time also varies in the case of those who are afterwards to undergo the more oppressive night of the spirit. For them the night of sense is an integral part of a higher destiny. It is 'ordinarily accompanied by burdensome trials and sensory temptations which last a long time, and in some longer than others . . . They must usually remain in these aridities and temptations for a long while no matter how quickly God leads them' (*ibid.* 14:6).

DARK NIGHT, BOOK II: The Passive Night of the Spirit

	General description	chapter 1
Proficients	Imperfections of proficients	2
	Radical purgation needed of	{ sense 3 spirit

STANZA I: Song of RENEWAL in GOD of all the soul's faculties 4

NIGHT OF SPIRIT (Loving Wisdom purges and illumines)	{	Afflictions of the Night	{	intellect	5 (6)		
				will	7		
				memory	8		
	{	Benefits	{	intellect (plus)	knowledge of God and things	9	
					Log of wood	10	
				{	will	Passion of love	11
					Purgatory of love fire	12	
			{		memory	Other benefits of Night	13
					Sheer Grace (stanza 1)	14	

STANZA II: SONG OF ESCAPE TO DIVINE UNION 15

secure	16	secret	17	ladder	18
Ten steps of the mystical ladder					
				first five	19
				second five	20
				disguise	21
Sheer Grace (stanza 2) 22					
Beyond the reach of Satan 23					
New bridal veil 24					
Some characteristics of spiritual Night 25					

CHAPTER NINE

DARK NIGHT II: THE PASSIVE NIGHT OF THE SPIRIT

BOOK II of *The Dark Night* begins by reminding us that if God intends to lead the soul on, he does not place it in the dark night of the spirit immediately after the afflictions and trials of the night of sense. Instead, after having emerged from the state of beginners, the soul usually spends many years exercising itself in the state of proficients.

In this new state, as one liberated from a cramped prison cell, the soul goes about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight than it did in the beginning before entering the night of sense. Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation and spiritual solicitude, as was their custom. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight (II *Dark Night* 1:1).

Nevertheless, even in this happy state, certain needs, aridities, darknesses, and conflicts can be felt occasionally, as omens of the night to come when they will be permanent. For the purification of the soul is not yet complete. Former habits of imperfection remain like roots in the spirit that were untouched by the sensory purgation. The sensory purgation was for spiritual integration rather than for immediate union with God. It accommodated the senses to the spirit so that both of them could be purified together and prepared for union. The real purgation of the senses begins with the night of the spirit. Both must undergo a complete renewal together for one part is never cleansed completely without the other. The difference between the two purgations, St John says, is like the difference between pulling up roots and cutting off a branch.

Accordingly, in his account of the night of sense, St John always seems to be hastening forward to the explanation of the night of the spirit. 'Hardly anything has been said of it, in sermons or in writing, and even the experience of it is very rare' (I *Dark Night* 8:2). For the same reason, he abbreviated considerably his treatment of the imperfections of proficients.

So much could be said about the imperfections of these proficients and of how irremediable they are — since proficients think their blessings are more spiritual than formerly — that I desire to pass over the matter. I only assert, in order to establish the necessity of the spiritual night for anyone who is to advance, that no proficient, however strenuous his efforts, will avoid many of these natural affections and imperfect habits; and these must be purified before he passes on to divine union (II *Dark Night* 2:4).

The night of the spirit completes the story of the soul's journey to perfect union with God.

Plan of the Book

There are twenty-five chapters in all and, in spite of the title of the book, only three chapters deal with the afflictions of the night. The other chapters describe the benefits of illumination and love that come to the soul. The commentary is taken up almost entirely with the first two stanzas of the poem. So the book falls naturally into two sections: the soul's *renewal* in God, and its *escape* to divine union. In both sections there is a thanksgiving chapter, because of the 'sheer grace' of being able to go out in freedom from enemies. The escape is not now from meditation and lowly ways of seeking God, but from all self-seeking that could impede divine union. The renewal section concentrates on the three faculties of intellect, will, and memory. The reason for this should be clear. According to St John, union with God is a 'union of likeness', a union in operation, God's will and the soul's will become one. In the high state of perfect union, the soul and God remain as distinct as before, but the soul's knowing and loving become one with the knowing and loving of God. The faculties of the soul, therefore, must be renewed and elevated to the divine level. The renewal experience

is a painful dark night for the soul. The loving inflow of God purges the soul of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, both spiritual and natural. God does this by means of a dark, obscure contemplation, a mystical theology, a secret wisdom.

Insofar as infused contemplation is loving wisdom of God, it produces two principal effects in the soul: it prepares the soul for union with God through love by both purging and illumining it. Hence the same loving wisdom that purges and illumines the blessed spirits, purges and illumines the soul here on earth (II *Dark Night* 5:1).

St John accordingly subdivided his treatment of renewal into the afflictions of the night and its benefits, purgation and illumination.

The second stanza of the poem tells how the escape to divine union took place. The soul went out 'in darkness, and secure, By the secret ladder, disguised, My house being now all stilled'. Almost each word in the stanza has a chapter to itself in the commentary (secure, 16; secret, 17; ladder, 18). There are ten steps of love on the mystical ladder (the first five, chapter 19; the second five, chapter 20). The disguise of the soul puts it beyond the reach of Satan (chapter 21). The discarding of all inordinate appetites and desires (My house being now at rest) is the obvious preparation for putting on the new bridal veil. Like the bride in the Song of Songs, who found Him whom her soul loved, the soul, now safe from the disturbances of the devil and the senses, receives from the divinity itself substantial touches of divine union. 'With these touches the soul is purified, quieted, strengthened, and made stable that it may be able to receive permanently this divine union, which is the divine espousal between the soul and the Son of God' (II *Dark Night* 24:3).

A very brief commentary on stanza three gives a few characteristics of the night of the spirit. And so the book ends.

Afflictions of the Night

Although the loving wisdom of God is divine light it

produces not only night and darkness in the soul but also affliction and torment. St John invokes two principles to explain why this happens. The first is taken from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: the clearer and more obvious divine things are in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are to the soul naturally. 'The brighter the light, the more the owl is blinded, and the more one looks at the brilliant sun, the more the sun darkens the faculty of sight, deprives it and overwhelms its weakness' (II *Dark Night* 5:3). The excellence of the divine wisdom exceeds the capacity of the soul which, because of its baseness and imperfection, suffers pain and affliction. The second principle is that two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject. This principle was applied by the Scholastics only to the extremes which mutually expel each other. Contraries in a modified state can exist together. St John enumerates some of the extremes which make the soul a battlefield. When the extreme of the uncreated perfection of God touches the other extreme of created imperfection, the soul feels that it is being cast away from all divine favour forever.

Because the light and wisdom of this contemplation is very bright and pure, and the soul in which it shines is dark and impure, a person will be deeply afflicted in receiving it within himself . . . When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, a person feels so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against him and that he is against God. Because it seems that God has rejected it, the soul suffers such pain and grief that when God tried Job in this way it proved one of the worst of Job's trials, as he says: Why have you set me against you, and I am heavy and burdensome to myself (Job 7:20). Clearly beholding its impurity by means of this pure light, although in darkness, the soul understands distinctly that it is worthy neither of God nor of any creature. And what most grieves it is that it thinks it will never be worthy and that there are no more blessings for it. Both sense and spirit, as under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief . . . How amazing and pitiful it is that the soul be so utterly weak and impure that the hand of God, though light and gentle, should feel so heavy and contrary. For the hand of God does not press down or weigh upon the soul, but only touches it;

and this mercifully, for God's aim is to grant it favours and not chastise it (I *Dark Night* 5:5,6).

The conflict of extremes is exemplified in a unique way in the agony of Christ in the garden. The comparison was chosen by Fr Marie-Eugene, who pointed out that the night of the spirit takes place in the inmost depths of the soul (not in the subconscious sense order).

The dark night of the spirit is truly a drama. To get some light on its horror and explain its fruitfulness, one must compare it with the drama of Gethsemane, which it prolongs. Gethsemane was witness to the conflict between the purity of God and the sin of the world, waged in the sacred humanity of Christ who bore that twofold weight. In his humanity he was crushed by it, broken, made into nothingness . . . The night of the spirit is a participation in that suffering and that victory (*I am a Daughter of the Church*, pp. 300–508 which includes a beautiful section on the role of the blessed Virgin in the night of the soul's distress).

St John's comparisons are even more striking. They are taken mostly from the psalms, from Job and the Lamentations of Jeremiah, hints of his own experience surfacing when he describes what the soul 'feels' at this time.

The divine extreme is the purgative contemplation and the human extreme is the soul, the receiver of this contemplation. Since the divine extreme strikes in order to renew the soul and divinize it . . . it so disentangles and dissolves the spiritual substance — absorbing it in a profound darkness — that the soul at the sight of its miseries feels that it is melting away and being undone by a cruel spiritual death . . . It is fitting that the soul be in this sepulchre of dark death in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes (II *Dark Night* 6:1).

Contemplation is also compared to fire, the biblical image for inward cleansing as opposed to water for outward washing. Just as fire consumes the rust of metal, contemplation annihilates and consumes all the imperfect habits the soul had contracted throughout its life. Since these imperfections are deeply rooted in the substance of the soul, the suffering is an oppressive experience in the interior depths of the soul.

It feels terrible annihilation in its very substance and extreme

poverty as though it were approaching its end . . . But what the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected it, and with an abhorrence of it cast it into darkness. The thought that God has abandoned it is a piteous and heavy affliction for the soul . . . When this purgative contemplation oppresses a man, he feels very vividly indeed the shadow of death, the sighs of death, and the sorrows of hell, all of which reflect the feeling of God's absence, of being chastised and rejected by Him, and of being unworthy of Him, as well as the object of His anger. The soul experiences all this and even more, for now it seems that this affliction will last forever (II *Dark Night* 6:3).

Perhaps St John's personal experience is reflected in his admonition that one ought to have deep compassion for the soul God places in this frightful night. The soul is fortunate because of the great work God is accomplishing in it. 'Nevertheless the soul is deserving of great pity because of the immense tribulation it suffers and its extreme uncertainty about a remedy. It believes, as Jeremiah says, that its evil will never end'. No doctrine or spiritual direction can be a support or consolation to the soul at this time,

. . . for until the Lord finishes purging him in the way He desires, no remedy is a help to him in his sorrow . . . He resembles one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move, nor see, nor feel any favour from heaven or earth. He remains in this condition until his spirit is humbled, softened, and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple, and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God (II *Dark Night* 7:3).

Renewal of the soul in God

A final comparison used by St John sums up his teaching: purgative contemplation has the same effect on the soul as fire on a log of wood. The soul is prepared for union with God just as wood, on an older understanding, is prepared for transformation into fire. Fire first expels the moisture, then makes the wood black and ugly and causes it to give out smoke. The fire cleanses the wood of these ugly, dark accidents and transforms it into itself, making it as beautiful as itself. It now possesses the

properties and performs the actions of fire. So, St John says, should we philosophize about the divine, loving fire of contemplation. 'With this example in mind . . . it will be a good thing to leave these sad experiences and begin now to discuss the fruit of the soul's tears' (II *Dark Night* 10:10).

In the night of painful contemplation, the fire of love penetrates the soul's depths, and so, unlike love's urgent longings of the sense night, the effect is an interior cleansing rather than an external washing.

For the enkindling of love occurs in the spirit and through it the soul in the midst of these dark conflicts feels vividly and keenly that it is being wounded by a strong divine love, and it has a certain feeling and foretaste of God. Yet it understands nothing in particular, for the intellect is in darkness. The spirit herein experiences an impassioned and intense love, because this spiritual inflaming engenders the passion of love. Since this love is infused, it is more passive than active and thus generates in the soul a strong passion of love. This love is now beginning to possess something of union with God and thereby shares to a certain extent in its properties. These properties are actions of God more than of the soul and they reside in it passively, although the soul does give its consent (II *Dark Night* 11:1,2).

The consequence of this passion of love is the same as what happens in any human 'passion'. It drains out on its own behalf all the energies and strength of the other faculties and powers. When a person is the victim of an evil 'passion', then reputation, property, friends and physical well-being are all sacrificed on the altar of this one craving. Similarly, when the soul is 'wounded' and impassioned with divine love, all its strength and appetites are recollected in this burning of love.

One might, then, in a certain way ponder how remarkable and how strong this enkindling of love in the spirit can be. God gathers together all the strength, faculties, and appetites of the soul, spiritual and sensory alike, that the energy and power of this whole harmonious composite may be employed in this love. The soul consequently arrives at the true fulfilment of the first commandment which, neither disdaining anything human nor excluding it from this love,

states: You shall love your God with your whole heart and with your whole mind and with your whole soul and with all your strength (II *Dark Night* 11:4).

Love has this characteristic: everything seems possible to it. It believes everyone is occupied as it is itself, and it does not believe that anyone could be employed in any other way or seek anyone other than Him whom it seeks and loves. It believes there is nothing else to desire. The soul, wounded with love, goes out 'anxiously and forcibly' in search of its God. The soul, in its purgative darkness, could see only its own misery and unworthiness. How does it now have this new energy and daring to go out towards union with God? The first reason is that even though this 'happy night' darkens the spirit, it does so only to impart light concerning all things; and even though it humbles a person and reveals his miseries, it does so only to exalt him; and even though it impoverishes him and deprives him of all possessions, it does so only that 'he may reach out divinely to the enjoyment of all earthly and heavenly things, with a general spirit of freedom in them all' (II *Dark Night* 9:1). The second reason is the nature of love which always seeks union. The divinely gifted soul's hunger and thirst to be 'united, joined, equalled, and assimilated to the loved object' impart strength and daring beyond the soul's natural capacity. It was the function of the night of the spirit to divinize the faculties of the soul, and so equip them for the exalted state of union. The soul calls it a 'sheer grace' because a work of renovation has been accomplished in it which, like resurrection from death, could be brought about only by God.

God makes the soul die to all that He is not, so that when it is stripped and flayed of its old skin, He may clothe it anew. Its youth is renewed like the eagle's, clothed in the new man which is created, as the Apostle says, according to God. This renovation is: an illumination of the human intellect with supernatural light so that it becomes divine, united with the divine; an informing of the will with love of God so that it is no longer less than divine and loves in no other way than divinely, united and made one with the divine will and love; and also a divine conversion and change of the

memory, the affections, and the appetites according to God. And thus this soul will be a soul of heaven, heavenly and more divine than human (II *Dark Night* 13:11).

The Escape

We are told that the angels rejoice over a sinner who repents. Considering the fragile nature of human freedom, the escape of a soul to divine union must also be a cause of rejoicing. Seen in the divine light, the journey to perfect union with God is an exciting escape story. Some of the excitement comes through St John's account of it, especially through the kind of images he uses. But he seems to be more intent on proving that the happy outcome of union is the direct result of the properties of the dark night. Even if the actual experience of the night gives a contrary impression,

... we should not think a person runs a more serious risk of being lost because of the torments of anguish, the doubts, the fears, and the horrors of this night and darkness, for rather a man is saved in the darkness of this night. In this night the soul subtly escapes from its enemies, who are always opposed to its departure (II *Dark Night* 15:1).

Angelic decisions once made remain unchanged forever. But the human person has a certain mobility through his passions and appetites. By these he may fail through excess or defect; he may change or go astray. Because of his appetites a man may become his own enemy. 'Once all these operations and movements are impeded, he is obviously freed from error in them, because he is not only liberated from himself but also from his other enemies, the world and the devil' (II *Dark Night* 16:2). In the dark night a person is secure from vainglory, from pride and presumption, and from many other evils. It is a singular grace that his appetites are darkened, his inclinations constrained and dry, and his faculties incapacitated for any interior activity. God is removing the merely human activity to replace it with a more elevated one. For St John of the Cross, the mystery of God is like an unknown country. To reach it a

man cannot be guided by his own knowledge. He must walk in darkness by new and unknown roads. The experience may be that of getting lost, but God has begun to move the soul divinely so that it can abandon the familiar paths. 'Indeed, it is getting lost to what it knew and tasted, and going by a way in which it neither tastes nor knows' (ibid. 16:8).

The secret ladder

St John's description of the 'secrecy' of this dark contemplation is one of the clearest insights into the nature of mystical theology. He gives a number of reasons why it is called 'secret'. The experience itself is ineffable, the path to it humanly unknowable. Divine things are not known as they are in themselves while they are being sought, but only when they are already found and acquired. One advances towards them by not knowing rather than by knowing. In addition, mystical wisdom is 'secret' because

it has the characteristic of hiding the soul within itself. Besides its usual effect, this mystical wisdom will occasionally so engulf a person in its secret abyss that he will have the keenest awareness of being brought into a place far removed from every creature. He will accordingly feel that he has been led into a remarkably deep and vast wilderness, unattainable by any human creature, into an immense, unbounded desert, the more delightful, savorous, and loving, the deeper, vaster, and more solitary it is (ibid. 17:6).

This secret wisdom is called a ladder. For, 'as one climbs a ladder to pillage the fortresses containing goods and treasures, so too, by this secret contemplation, the soul ascends in order to plunder, know, and possess the goods and treasures of heaven' (ibid. 18:1). A ladder is used for ascent and descent. Secret contemplation exalts the soul in God and humbles it within itself. For there are many ups and downs in the spiritual journey. Yet the ladder of contemplation reaches up even unto God himself.

For He is at the end of the ladder and it is in Him that the ladder rests. The ladder of contemplation, derived as we have said from God, is prefigured in that ladder Jacob saw in his sleep and by

which the angels were ascending and descending from God to man and from man to God while God leaned on the top. The divine Scriptures say that all this happened at night, while Jacob was sleeping, to disclose how secret is the way and ascent to God and how it differs from human knowledge (ibid. 18:4).

The principal property involved in calling contemplation a ladder is that it is a science of love, 'an infused, loving knowledge, that both illumines and enamours the soul, elevating it step by step unto God, its Creator' (ibid. 18:5). The steps of love here are not so much a total list of the degrees of charity, as the more elevated levels which the contemplative soul mounts rapidly to the embrace of God. There is the sickness of love, the search for God in all things, the many great works done for God. The soul thinks they are very few, like Jacob's seven years' toil, which he thought little of for the greatness of his love. A delight in suffering for the Beloved is rewarded by a God-given daring which the soul needs in order to move forward to divine union. 'The soul is ever believing that it is finding its Beloved; and when it sees its desire frustrated, which is almost at every step, it faints in its longing' (ibid. 19:5). The eighth step of love impels the soul to lay hold of the Beloved without letting him go. The ninth step is the step of the perfect soul, burning gently with love under the influence of the Holy Spirit. 'We cannot speak of the goods and riches of God a man enjoys on this step because even were we to write many books about them, the greater part would remain unsaid' (ibid. 20:4). After reaching the ninth step in this life, the soul departs from the body. The tenth and last step of this ladder assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear beatific vision which a person possesses as soon as he reaches it. On this last step of clear vision at the top of the ladder where God rests, nothing is any longer hidden from the soul.

Thus by means of this mystical theology and secret love, the soul departs from itself and all things and ascends to God (cf. ibid. 20:6).

CHAPTER TEN

THE LIVING FLAME — A FORETASTE OF GLORY

BETWEEN 1582 and 1585, St John of the Cross was in Granada. A devout widow, called Dona Ana de Penelosa, had loaned her house to the Carmelite nuns when they were making a foundation in that city. St John wrote some verses for her (four six-line stanzas), beginning with the words, 'O Living Flame of Love'. The title was: 'Stanzas which the soul recites in the intimate union with God, its beloved Bridegroom'. Dona Ana then asked for some explanation of the poem. He felt reluctant to give an explanation, he said, because the stanzas deal with matters so interior and spiritual, for which words are usually lacking. Another reason he gave was that one speaks badly of the intimate depths of the spirit if one does not do so with a deeply recollected soul. He deferred writing until a period 'in which the Lords seems to have uncovered some knowledge and bestowed some fervour'. The commentary was completed in a fortnight. He was encouraged to write by the thought that his 'reader understands that everything I say is as far from the reality as is a painting from the living object represented' (LF Prol. 1).

The Living Flame and *The Spiritual Canticle* deal with the same high degree of perfect union with God, the spiritual marriage, total transformation in the Beloved (*Sp. Cant.* 22:3 K 497). *The Living Flame* focuses on certain acts of love within that state of transformation, acts of a deeper quality and rare perfection. Love can always receive added quality and become more intensified. We might say that, whereas the *Canticle* moves forward horizontally from simple union to betrothal, to mystical marriage, the *Flame* has only a vertical movement.

The imagery of fire and flame are used to bring out this difference. The soul is so inwardly transformed in the fire of love and has received such quality from it that it is not merely united to this fire but produces within it a living flame. St John had already used the figure of the log of wood put into a furnace. The wood first becomes black and ugly; it is drained dry of its tears and shrivelled, in the purgation of the Night. Afterwards, 'it is united to the fire and transformed into it; but in time, as the fire burns up, the wood also grows warmer, becomes incandescent, and throws out its own flames and sparks' (LF Prol. 3). It is of this degree of love that the soul speaks in *The Living Flame*. It suffers no longer. The flame no longer afflicts or distresses, as it did in the beginning when the flame was not so friendly and gentle towards it as now in this state of union. The soul addresses the flame therefore with the intimate and delicate sweetness of love: 'O living flame of love, That tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest centre'.

This flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, which is the Holy Spirit. The soul feels Him within itself not only as a fire which has consumed and transformed it, but as a fire that burns and flares within it . . . And that flame, every time it flares up, bathes the soul in glory and refreshes it with the quality of divine life. Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the soul transformed in love; the interior acts He produces shoot up flames for they are acts of inflamed love, in which the will of the soul united with that flame, made one with it, loves most sublimely (LF 1:3 K 580).

With these acts of inflamed love, the soul reaches a pinnacle in its vertical movement and becomes one with the action of the Holy Spirit. One act of this kind is more precious and of more value to the Church and the world than all the other works a person may have done during a whole lifetime. In the commentary, St John maintains a very exalted level of thought as he describes this profound theological reality. The whole Trinity is at work in the soul, each divine Person bestowing a gift that produces a distinct effect. The delightful wound of love is attributed to the Holy Spirit, the taste of eternal life to the delicate touch of the Son, the transformation of the soul

to the gentle hand of the Father. 'The soul now feels that it is all inflamed in the divine union, and that its palate is all bathed in glory and love' (LF 1:1 K 579, 580). Every time the delicate flame of love, burning within, assails it, it does so as though glorifying it with gentle and powerful glory. Such is the glory this flame of love imparts that each time it absorbs and attacks, it seems that it is about to give eternal life.

The direct vision of God is not possible in this life, while a person remains within the order of faith. For beatific vision, the soul needs the gift of a new power, the *lumen gloriae*, the light of glory. What the soul does in heaven by means of the light of glory, it does on earth often in its own fashion, by means of a highly illumined faith but on a plane notably lower than the beatific vision. Contemplative lights perfect the supernatural life on earth and are the beginning of eternal life, but without being able to bring it to full perfection. The impassable gulf between the two realms is expressed in *The Spiritual Canticle* as the painful experience of souls after they have gone out in search of the Beloved: 'For an immense good is shown them, as through the fissure of a rock, but not granted them. Thus their pain and torment is unspeakable' (stanza 1:22). In *The Living Flame*, however, though the theological principle remains, the soul perceives much more clearly the power of the next life and the weakness of the present one. Yet it feels that the veil between them is of very delicate texture, as thin as a spider's web, 'so spiritual, thin and luminous that it does not prevent the divinity from vaguely appearing through it' (LF 1:32).

St John admits that we are dealing here with very rare experiences, 'more remarkable than credible'. He knows that some people will either fail to believe them or consider the account of them an exaggeration. His reply is:

There is no reason to marvel at God's granting such sublime and strange gifts to souls He determines to favour. If we consider that He is God and that He bestows them as God, with infinite love and goodness, it does not seem unreasonable. The Father of lights, who is not close-fisted but diffuses Himself abundantly, as the sun does

its rays, without being a respecter of persons, wherever there is room . . . does not hesitate or consider it of little import to find His delight with the children of men at a common table in the world (LF 1:15).

The Glory of God

We read in Exodus 24:17 that 'the appearing of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel'. We cannot have any clear idea of the holiness of God, his intrinsic essential being. The 'glory of the Lord' was the image employed in the Bible to denote the presence of God as it materialised on the mountain or in the temple, in the form of fire or smoke. The Greek word *doxa* (glory) became the term for the manner in which God's heavenly majesty was outwardly manifested, revealed and concealed. In the New Testament, the traditional glory of Yahweh, became the 'glory' of Christ (the radiant fire of Yahweh's presence). The word *doxa* was purposely used in the Gospels to suggest the divinity of Christ. Since glory implies a visible manifestation of God's majesty in acts of power, glory was revealed most of all in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the great acts of God's power. That is why, in his priestly prayer, the offertory prayer of his sacrifice, Jesus prayed: 'Father, glorify your Son that your Son may glorify you'. All Jesus' actions were full of glory, apparent to faith (Professor Dodd), but the glory he prayed for could be revealed only when his 'hour' had come. And so, in St John the Evangelist, we find that 'the glorification of Jesus, begun by signs, culminates in a death accepted in love, as the very act by which the Father glorifies him and he the Father' (Ralph Russell on John, *New Cath. Comment*, p.1034; R. Brown 2:781 on John 17:24; Rahner, *Concise Theol. Dict.* 'Doxa').

The meaning of glory here has switched from outward splendid manifestation to the supreme act of love by which Christ yields himself up in death to the Father. Because of the perfect union of his will with that of the Father in their common Spirit, the desire of Jesus — 'Glorify your Son that your Son

may glorify you' — is fulfilled in one and the same act, which is the offering of the Son and the acceptance of the Father. As in the Mass, the offertory of Jesus has passed through the sacrifice of death to the supreme moment of doxology, in which Jesus gives to the Father in the Spirit, all honour and glory. The glorification of Jesus is the glory of the Father.

The Living Flame might be located properly in this realm of doxology. The sacerdotal prayer of Jesus is realised in the soul that is completely united to him. God glorifies the soul that the soul may glorify him. It is absorbed in God's glory. This is not a blaze of light that we could behold in a material way. It consists essentially in the acts by which God knows and loves himself. Because of the supreme delight and joy that God finds in his own excellence, he willed that others outside himself should exist to participate in this supreme good. In theological terms, God was so delighted with his Son that he freely willed other reflections of himself to exist, in the likeness of his Son, who is the brightness of his glory and the image of his substance.

The scholastic definition of glory, familiar to St John of the Cross, was *clara notitia cum laude*: clear knowledge accompanied by praise. St Thomas attributes the definition to St Ambrose, but it is found also in St Augustine (St Thom. I II 2:3). St John does not employ the definition explicitly, but in *The Living Flame* there is much reference to the clear knowledge and the praise (stanza 3:3 K 611; 3:84, 85, K 643). What St John emphasises is the *claritas*, the splendid character of this knowledge and inflamed love. He is discussing a pinnacle of human activity at one with the action of the Holy Spirit, an intimate sharing in the attributes of God so that the soul can give back to God a perfect praise. In the poem then, the *clara notitia* of the soul is its splendid knowledge of the divine attributes: lamps of fire from the splendour and beauty of God.

O Lamps of fire
In whose splendours
The deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscure and blind,

Now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
Both warmth and light to their Beloved. (stanza 3).

The intimate union of the soul with God is the source of this

abundant and lofty knowledge . . . which is all loving, and which communicates light and love to its faculties and feeling. That which was once obscure and blind can now receive illumination and warmth of love, so as to give forth light and love to the one who illumined it and filled it with love.

First of all it should be known that lamps possess two properties: they transmit both light and heat. To understand the nature of these lamps and how they shine and burn within the soul, it ought to be known that God in His unique and simple being is all the powers and grandeurs of His attributes. He is almighty, wise, and good; and He is merciful, just, powerful, and loving etc. and He is the other infinite attributes and powers of which we have no knowledge . . . Since each of these attributes is the very being of God . . . and since each one is God Himself, Who is infinite light or divine fire, we deduce that the soul, like God, gives forth light and warmth through each of these innumerable attributes. Each of these attributes is a lamp which enlightens it and transmits the warmth of love (LF 3:2).

God thus becomes for the soul a lamp of omnipotence, a lamp of wisdom, a lamp of goodness, a lamp of beauty, a lamp of fortitude, justice and mercy etc. And the soul loves him because he is all these things. St John expresses his opinion that this manifestation and communication of God to the soul is the greatest possible in this life. God is to the soul innumerable lamps, giving forth knowledge and love of himself, while the soul not only reflects these attributes but gives them back to God.

The habitual state of the soul is one of transformation in God, but its activity does not always reach the exalted level of being illumined 'within the splendours of God'. Nevertheless, sometimes the burning log is seen to flare up so that it becomes one with the flame of the Holy Spirit.

The movements of these divine flames . . . are not alone produced by the soul that is transformed in the flames of the Holy Spirit, nor does the Holy Spirit produce them alone, but they are the work of

both the soul and Him . . . Thus these movements of both God and the soul are not only splendours, but also glorifications of the soul . . . It seems in these that He is always wanting to bestow eternal life and transport it completely to perfect glory by bringing it to Himself (*LF* 3:10).

Doxology

Because of the soul's perfect union with God in the state of mystical marriage, it is drawn into the intimate life of God and can give him perfect praise.

For the will of the two is one will, and thus God's operation (action) and the soul's are one. Since God gives Himself with a free and gracious will, so too the soul gives to God, God Himself in God; and this is a true and complete gift of the soul to God . . . Thus it gives Him to its Beloved, Who is the very God Who gave Himself to it. By this donation it repays God for all it owes Him, since it willingly gives as much as it receives from Him . . . A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul, like the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both are possessed by both together (*LF* 3:18).

St John notes the refinement with which the soul makes this surrender. Its bearing before God is of rare excellence in regard to its love, and its gratitude, and its praise. Firstly, it loves God now not through itself but through God. It loves through the Holy Spirit, as the Father and the Son love each other. Secondly, it loves God in God, 'for in this union the soul is vehemently absorbed in love of God, and God with great vehemence surrenders Himself to the soul'. Thirdly, it loves him on account of who he is, not because of what it receives from him. This is 'pure delight' to the soul without any admixture of its own pleasure.

The praise arising out of this love also has three excellences. The first is that it praises him as its duty, for it sees that God created it for his own praise. The second is that the soul praises God for the goods it receives and the delight it has in praising him. The third is that it praises God for what he is in himself. It takes intense delight in this praise, for it is absorbed with

extreme ardour in it. It is a much stronger and more delightful praise, 'pure praise', a praise only because of what God is (*LF* 3:78,79,82-85, K 641-643).

St John did not want to speak of this wonderful transforming work of the Holy Spirit, 'filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of so doing, and were I to try, it might seem less than it is' (*LF* 4:17 K 649). God created the soul for himself and all his gifts 'first and last, great and small, which God grants to the soul, he always grants in order to lead it to eternal life' (*ibid.* 3:10).

What God has in mind for each of us is the eternal fulfilment of the priestly prayer of Christ: 'the glory you have given me, I have given to them'.

APPENDIX I

READING SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

THOSE who read St John of the Cross for the first time can be put off by his writing. As a boy, he was apprenticed to various skills. Journalism was not one of them. Yet when he wanted to express the love enkindled within him from the abundance of his mystical understanding, he poured out 'secrets and mysteries' in a poetic medium that might be the envy of the greatest. But he did admit that his prose explanations were in a rough style, though this was not the chief cause of their obscurity. The beginner would find him difficult at first reading, he said, but 'if he reads this work a second time, the matter will seem clearer and the doctrine sounder'. He knew that his doctrine was 'good and very necessary' but that, even if he had written more elegantly, few would profit by it 'because we are not writing on pleasing and delightful themes addressed to the kind of spiritual people who like to approach God along sweet and satisfying paths' (Prol. *Ascent* 8; K 72).

It is not surprising that we hesitate to follow St John of the Cross into the totally unselfish realm of Christ's love. We feel uneasy with the words of our Lord himself when we reflect on the cost of discipleship. But what at first seems to be a heartless demand turns out to be the language of a most tender love, and it is our failure to grasp this love more than our fear of hardship that makes St John unpalatable reading. The half-hearted beginner will take offence at his severity. There is a sense in which St John of the Cross had no heart for himself. 'He who is in love is said to have his heart stolen or seized by the object of his love, for his heart will go out of self and become fixed on the loved object. Thus his heart or love is not

for himself, but for what he loves' (*Sp. Cant.* stanza 9:3 K 444). Whenever St John speaks 'heartlessly' he is concerned entirely with some disorder in respect to our union with God. While he is thinking of what we stand to gain, we have in mind perhaps only what we must give up. Because we are not yet free we read him apprehensively. His tastes had been already transformed in God before he began to write, so that he could not share our longing for earthly things. Instead, he multiplies arguments to convince us, knowing that our disordered appetites themselves hinder us from reasoning clearly about them. The truth of our situation is not left in doubt. Perfect union with God together with disordered attachment to creatures is an impossibility.

A person is indeed ignorant if he thinks it is possible to reach this high state of union with God without first emptying his appetite of all natural and supernatural things which can be a hindrance to him . . . For the doctrine the Son of Man came to teach is contempt of all things, that we may receive the gift of God's Spirit. As long as an individual fails to rid himself of these possessions, he is incapable of receiving God's Spirit in pure transformation (1 *Ascent* 5:2, K 81).

We must not mistake the rigour of St John's logic for a psychological rigorism. He was well aware that imperfect love is required to give only (and entirely) what it can. God does not demand the impossible. But the total mortification of all the appetites is not attained until a soul reaches perfect union with God. What grieved St John most was the thought that those who had received the grace to become detached from so much should then fail in the smaller things which God wanted them to overcome for love of him, since these trifling things can in fact impede so great a good.

Oh, if people knew how much spiritual good and abundance they lose by not attempting to raise their appetites above childish things, and if they knew to what extent, by not desiring the taste of these trifles, they would discover in this simple spiritual food the savour of them all (1 *Ascent* 5:4 K 82).

The totality of sacrifice which he demands is simply the logic of the total end to which he would lead us.

Some readers think that St John of the Cross speaks too much about suffering. But our lack of mortification is not his chief concern. He is thinking mostly of people who are already suffering, and perhaps to no good purpose. There are right ways and wrong ways of being an ascetic, and he would save us a futile labour. 'Some people — and it is sad to see them — work and tire themselves greatly, and yet go backwards; they look for perfection in exercises that are of no profit to them, but rather a hindrance' (Prol. *Ascent* 7 K 72). Even the consolations and favours of God given for advancement in perfection can become a hindrance. The joys and sorrows, hopes and afflictions which are experienced on the spiritual road may be interpreted for good or ill. On all these issues St John pours light, combining delicacy with firmness. He speaks with the confidence of a master. We never get the impression that he is feeling his way, or that we shall have to revise our opinion later on. In fact, his statements are so definitive that we could mistake them for harshness. This error is dispelled when we reflect on his profound spiritual experiences and the kind of man he became as a result of them.

In the inner cellar of my Beloved have I drunk;
There He gave me His breast,
There he taught me the science full of sweetness
And there I gave myself to Him myself without reserve;
There I promised to be His bride. (*Sp. Cant.* stanzas 26, 27).

This was the song in St John's heart after his long imprisonment in Toledo as the dawn broke in his night of the soul. The 'inner cellar' was his symbol for the spiritual marriage, when God shared with him the secrets of his love and taught him the science full of sweetness, that secret, peaceful, loving inflow of God, 'which spiritual persons call contemplation or mystical theology'. By this experience, like a prophet's inaugural vision, he received his mission to reveal to others some inklings of what this secret science means. When he began to describe the experience, it was inevitable that an unconscious spiritual self-portrait should emerge.

Until the Lord finishes purging him in the way He desires, no remedy is a help to him in his sorrow. He resembles one who is imprisoned in a dark dungeon, bound hands and feet, and able neither to move, nor see, nor feel any favour from heaven or earth. He remains in this condition until his spirit is humbled, softened, and purified, until it becomes so delicate, simple, and refined that it can be one with the Spirit of God (II *Dark Night* 7:3 K 341).

This is the kind of person who speaks to us in the writings of St John of the Cross. Like the prophets of old, he had first incarnated in himself the doctrine he was destined to impart.

Perhaps it was this spiritual attainment that dictated his style of writing. For beginners and even for the proficient he writes objectively in a scientific idiom. When he treats of the perfect, his language becomes much freer until, introducing *The Living Flame*, it is quite subjective: 'knowing the reader understands that everything I say is as far from the reality as is a painting from the living object represented, I shall venture to declare what I know'. But even in the beginning he is never so objective or detached as to forget his reader. He frequently gives us hints as to how we should read him. These hints occur during the course of his teaching, sometimes when he reminds us for whom he is then writing; sometimes when he qualifies a word to let us know its true meaning in the context. Particularly in the Prologues we find a useful key to what follows. Thus in the Prologue to the *Ascent*, admitting the obscurity of his doctrine at that stage, he gives the advice: 'This, I believe, will be the case as he begins to read, but as he reads on he will understand it better, since the latter parts will explain the former' (Prol. *Ascent* 8 K 72). This means that we must keep in mind the general plan or movement of his thought, since the force of his argument depends, as in all moral matters, on the goal of the journey, 'the latter parts explaining the former'.

Accordingly, we may think of four keys for reading St John of the Cross; the general plan of his work, the kind of reader he had in mind, the reason why he wrote and, not least important, his idiom or mode of writing.

The General Plan

The writings of St John of the Cross fall naturally into two parts. The first is the path to union with God, comprising *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (three books) and *The Dark Night* (two books). The second is the experience of this union which he expressed in two poems, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame*. His commentaries on these two poems may be described as a shared experience of the high state of union with God. Both parts of his work are journeys of the soul, each with its own dynamism. The first is simply the departure from selfishness (death to sin) in order to live to God. The second is the dynamism of love itself, when the purified soul moves on towards the perfection of love in spiritual espousal and continues until it reaches spiritual marriage, the ultimate state of perfection.

The dividing line between the two sections is the concept of union with God. An elaboration of this concept is not located at the end of the *Ascent-Night*, as one might expect, but in chapter five of *II Ascent*, where St John inserted it as a paranthesis in his treatment of the virtue of faith, since his argument could not proceed until the nature of the union of the soul with God had been clarified. The first thing a reader should do, then, is to take hold of this concept, noticing that St John has in mind the union and transformation of the soul in God. This takes place when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other and the soul, completely rid of all its selfishness, rests transformed in God through love (*II Ascent* stanza 5:3 K 116).

Immediately after chapter five it would be useful to go on to chapter seven which shows that the extent of the self-denial proposed by St John corresponds to the intensity of union that he has in mind. It also shows that during the soul's journey, Christ is the teacher and the model, as well as its crown and reward at the end. St John is not putting forward any pet theory of his own, but the pure doctrine and example of Christ. He takes no pleasure in stressing the hardships of the way. He strives rather to make attractive and practical what he knows is solid and substantial teaching.

O, who can make this counsel of our Saviour understandable, and practicable, and attractive that spiritual persons might become aware of the difference between the method many of them think is good and that which ought to be used in travelling this road . . . They think a denial of self in worldly matters is sufficient without an annihilation and purification of spiritual possessions (*II Ascent* 7:5 K 122).

This is the mystery of the gate and the way (Christ) that leads to union with God. For it was when Christ was most annihilated in all things that he accomplished the most marvellous work of his whole life, the reconciliation and union of the human race with God. 'The journey, then, does not consist in recreations, experiences, and spiritual feelings, but in the living sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior death of the cross' (*II Ascent* 7:11 K 125).

But the mystery of the gate and the way is a paschal mystery, whereby we pass over from the condition of slavery to the liberty of the children of God. The poem of the *Night* is the song of this deliverance. Therefore the metaphor of slavery used so effectively by St Paul in Romans and Galatians is a good key to the general plan of *Ascent-Night*. It preserves the excitement of the soul's journey and is involved in St John's metaphor of the *Night*. St John frequently refers to man's 'wretched state of captivity' because of original sin. He calls it a sheer grace to be released from this prison without hindrance from the jailers (*I Ascent* 15), for a person attached to his appetites 'is considered and treated by God as a base slave and prisoner, not as a son. And freedom cannot abide in a heart dominated by the appetites — in a slave's heart; it dwells in a liberated heart, which is a son's heart' (*I Ascent* 4:6 K 80).

The happiness of escape is the burden of the two books of *The Dark Night*. At the beginning of the *Ascent* he quotes the eight stanzas of the poem so that 'the reader may see in them a summary of the doctrine expounded, a basis for all I shall say'. The poem is a song of happiness in having passed through the dark night of faith to union with the Beloved. It is the soul's song of joy celebrating its escape from the prison of self-love.

It praises the night of its exodus, and it has been well compared to the famous *Exultet* of Easter (see article 'Night and Light. The poet John of the Cross and the *Exultet* of the Easter Liturgy', by John Sullivan in *Ephemer. Carm.* XXX, 52). 'The power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride. Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth and man is reconciled with God' (The *Exultet*). In St John's poem the night is celebrated because it was the guide in the way and the cause of union at the end: 'night that joined the lover / To the beloved bride / Transfiguring them each into the other' (Roy Campbell translation).

The general plan of *Ascent-Night* is structured around the Exodus theme or St Paul's metaphor of liberation from slavery in Romans 8: 'The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery but a Spirit that makes us sons'. Obviously the slave will have great difficulty in emerging from his accustomed condition and way of life. Particular difficulty will arise when there is question of adapting his inner self to the loving atmosphere of his new home. The theological or divine virtues must perfect the faculties of the child of God. *Ascent* II and III show how he must actively clothe himself in these new garments. So these two books are taken up entirely with the three theological virtues. In fact, man cannot complete this work himself. The Spirit of God must take out the heart of stone and give him the heart of flesh instead, 'so that from a human and lowly will it may be changed into the divine will, made identical with the will of God' (III *Ascent* 16:3 K 238). This work of the Spirit is treated in the two books of *The Dark Night*, especially the second where

God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness . . . For this privation is one of the conditions required that the spiritual form, which is the union of love, may be introduced in the spirit and united with it. The Lord works all of this in the soul by means of a pure and dark contemplation (II *Dark Night* 3:3 K 333).

The soul is now clothed in the 'new man' and its faculties and works are more divine than human. 'Through this contemplation, God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in the perfection of love without its doing anything nor understanding how this happens' (II *Night* 5:1 K 335).

The reader he had in mind

There has been some difference of opinion as to the kind of reader St John of the Cross had in mind. In the Prologue to the *Ascent* he says that his 'main intention is not to address everyone, but only some of the persons of our holy Order of the Primitive Observance of Mount Carmel, both friars and nuns . . . since they are the ones who asked me to write this work' (Prol. *Ascent* 7 K 72). Even if we see it only as his 'main intention', this seems to restrict his literary audience. A further restriction is implied in the words 'some of the persons of our holy Order', where the reason given is not that they belong to 'our holy Order' but that 'they are already detached to a great extent from the temporal things of this world and will more easily grasp this doctrine on the nakedness of spirit'. This does not mean that they were contemplatives already, but they were at least beginners. A beginner, for St John of the Cross, is the soul that God nurtures and caresses like a loving mother 'after it has been resolutely converted to His service' (I *Night* 1:1 K 298). He qualifies the state of beginners as those who practise meditation on the spiritual road. He goes to some trouble to describe the characteristics of beginners in order to help them understand the feebleness of their state and take courage and desire that God place them in the night where they may be strengthened. But when we read his well-known passages on the imperfections of beginners, we recognise them as very fervent beginners, 'after they have been resolutely converted to His service'.

Like all sacred writers, St John would have liked to help everyone on the way to God. His doctrine on the path to union with God has a universal character.

'Our goal will be, with God's help, to explain all these points so that everyone who reads this book will in some way discover the road he is walking along'. To this he adds a significant limitation: 'and the one he ought to follow if he wants to reach the summit of the mount' (Prol. *Ascent* 7 K 72). So, obviously, everything said is not prescribed for everyone indiscriminately as a practical norm. Introducing the *Ascent-Night*, St John proposes doctrine for both beginners and proficient. When laying down conditions for the emptiness of the faculties, he alerts the reader to the distinction between the two categories so that beginners may not imprudently attempt this exercise before their time.

Remember that I am now addressing those especially who have begun to enter the state of contemplation . . . Let us address the intellect of the spiritual man, particularly of him whom God has favoured with the state of contemplation, for, as I asserted, I am now speaking especially to these individuals (II *Ascent* 6:8 K 121; 7:13 K 125).

Much difficulty and misunderstanding could be avoided if we kept these warnings in mind. He repeats them frequently, for he is most sensitive to the different times and phases in the soul's journey to God. 'In each of these books the reader must keep in mind the intention we have in writing. Failure to do so will give rise to many doubts about what he reads' (III *Ascent* 2:1 K 214). This has particular importance when putting his doctrine into practice. Of course there are other good motives for reading. The whole journey to God is of interest at any point on the way, especially since St John's writing is obviously the story of a great love, reaching its longed-for term eventually in perfect union with the Beloved. Even the most elementary beginner in God's love will appreciate the excitement of the venture and be able to marvel at its consummation.

Why he wrote

In the Prologue to the *Ascent*, St John tells us that he is undertaking 'this arduous task not because of any particular

confidence in my own abilities. Rather I am confident that the Lord will help me to explain this matter, because it is extremely necessary to so many souls' (Prol. *Ascent* 3 K 70).

At the time he was writing there were many books on the practice of meditation and there were good accounts of perfect contemplation, but there was nothing worthwhile on the intervening stages. Particularly, there was great misunderstanding of the two transition periods or crises, one which marked the beginning of infused contemplation (Night of Sense), and the other which introduced the soul to perfect union with God (Night of Spirit). To St John, this situation was lamentable because of the amount of unprofitable suffering entailed and the failure of many to reach the perfection that God had destined for them. As he saw it, whole periods or parts of the journey, because of their obscurity and pain, were written off as mere psychological aberrations, or hangovers from a former sinful life, or even as symptoms of God's wrath. Because St John had pity for souls in this predicament, he felt compelled to offer help in writing. His discernment of God's ways and his zeal for the perfection of divine work in souls forced him to speak harshly of incompetent spiritual directors.

It will happen that while an individual is being conducted by God along a sublime path of dark contemplation and aridity, in which he feels lost, he will encounter in the midst of the fulness of his darkness, trials, conflicts, and temptations, someone who, in the style of Job's comforters, will proclaim that all of this is due to melancholia, or depression, or temperament, or some hidden wickedness, and that as a result God has forsaken him. Others will tell him that he is falling back, since he finds no satisfaction or consolation as he previously did in the things of God . . . The director does not understand that . . . it is a period for leaving these persons alone in the purgation God is working in them, a time to give comfort and encouragement that they may desire to endure this suffering as long as God wills, for until then, no remedy — whatever the soul does, or the confessor says — is adequate (Prol. *Ascent* 4 K 71).

It comes as a surprise to discover that, in his commentary on *The Living Flame*, of all places, St John 'indulged' in a

lengthy digression on the harm done by faulty direction (LF stanza 3, 32–37, K 621–624). But it is only at that exalted level that the gravity of the situation can be rightly assessed, 'a damage beyond anything imaginable'. The harm done is greater and worthy of deeper sorrow than the disturbance and ruin of many ordinary souls. Because of the refined nature of the sublime working of the Spirit at this time, neither the soul nor its director understands it.

A person can with the greatest ease disturb and hinder these anointings by no more than the least act he may desire of his memory, intellect, or will, or by making use of his senses, appetite, knowledge, or his own satisfaction and pleasure. This is all seriously harmful and a great sorrow and pity (*Sp. Cant.* Prol. 3).

His idiom or mode of writing

Ancient philosophers thought of the sciences as sometimes interrelated in a special way. Thus musical science was said to be a derivative of the science of numbers. As a result, the science of music would require a twofold idiom. It would depend on arithmetic for principles which it would not trouble to establish, but would follow its own investigation with a view to the pleasure of harmony. If a musician wanted to share his experience of harmony he would be forced to use a metaphorical language, less exacting than strict science would permit. His idiom then might be threefold. Even if similar words had to be used in all three realms, the meaning would depend on which strand of the total weave he intended to employ.

Something like this happens in the writings of St John of the Cross, since mystical theology is often spoken of as a derivative science. Introducing his commentary on *The Spiritual Canticle*, he wrote to Mother Ann of Jesus: 'Even though Your Reverence lacks training in scholastic theology by which divine truths are understood, you are not wanting in mystical theology which is known through love and by which one not only knows but at the same time experiences' (*Sp. Cant.* Prol. 3 K 409). He says explicitly that he will use some scholastic theology in his explanations. But the material at hand in mystical

science exceeds the ambit of explanation.

It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding are fully explainable . . . Who can describe the understanding He gives to loving souls in whom He dwells? And who can express the experience He imparts to them? Certainly, no one can! Not even they who receive these communications. As a result these persons let something of their experiences overflow in figures and similes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations (*Sp. Cant.* Prol. 1 K 408).

From which St John concludes that if these similitudes are not read with the simplicity of the spirit they contain, they will seem to be absurdities rather than reasonable utterances. In other words, we must recognise his idiom.

The terminology of mystical theology was already more or less established by the time St John began to write. Mystical writers, having no words for ineffable realities, had taken over the terms of philosophy or theology but gave them a significance proper to their own realm. Being a science of experience, its language represented the psychological registration of the mystics rather than abstract concepts. Thus the 'sensory' and the 'spiritual' are realms of experience rather than philosophical determinations. The mystic recognises parts of the soul which, to the philosopher, is a simple, indivisible substance. A certain depth of mystical experience will open a new depth of soul which the mystic will refer to as the substance of the soul. To confuse this with the philosopher's notion of substance would be to mistake the idiom. A similar confusion follows the word 'infused', in St John's use of the words 'infused contemplation'. This is not a reference to the supernatural principle of infused virtue, nor to a supernatural object, but to a supernatural mode, to how the contemplative has come by his experience. This mysterious 'how' is beyond ordinary explanation, and the word 'infused' has to do duty as the nearest psychological approximation.

It is also worth noting that St John's abundant use of figures and similes in his later commentaries was purposely

designed to leave his 'explanation' open, so that each one could derive profit from it.

Though we give some explanation of these stanzas, there is no need to be bound to this explanation. For mystical wisdom, which comes through love . . . need not be understood distinctly in order to cause love and affection in the soul, for it is given according to the mode of faith through which we love God without understanding Him (*Sp. Cant. Prol. 2 K 409*).

Conclusion

In judging a writer like St John of the Cross, much will depend on what the reader expects. Apart from those engaged in historical research, readers will normally want a book to be relevant. A good book should respond to a spiritual need of the time. The great spiritual need of our time is a sense of God and, in consequence, a right understanding of creatures. Ultimately, in the pursuit of perfection, as in all moral striving, it is the sense of God that fashions personal decision. Every page of St John of the Cross breathes out this sense of God, both his transcendence and his immanence to the whole of creation.

When we look through St John's writings, we seem at first to meet a very demanding God. This impression is inevitable since love, of its nature, is so much more demanding than law. Its demands can be measured rightly only by what God required of his own beloved Son. It is this height of love that confronts us in the works of St John of the Cross. He perfects our sense of God by revealing the infinite character of Love. Yet his contemplative vision does not terminate in a 'Suffering Servant', even one infinitely loving. Like the early Fathers of the Church, he also opens for us a new sense of creation. For the Son of man, being lifted up from the earth, lifted up all things in himself. The Word is the splendour of the Father's glory, and when he became man 'he elevated human nature in the beauty of God and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all' (*Sp. Cant. stanza 5:4 K 435*).

St John of the Cross had a fine appreciation of the soul's suffering in its struggle for perfection. But a large part of his

writing is devoted to the fruit of that labour, to the delights of union with God. This part of his work is pure Resurrection spirituality, full of the serenity of the new creation as it appeared to him, clothed in the beauty and dignity of the Incarnation. 'In this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of His Son and through the glory of His resurrection according to the flesh, the Father did not merely beautify creatures partially, but rather we can say, clothed them wholly in beauty and dignity' (*Sp. Cant. stanza 5:4 K 435*).

WHERE TO BEGIN *

It seems to me that the best way to start is with the Minor Works.

- A. Poetry: The shepherd poem
I know the spring that flows
The Romances
- B. Sayings of Light and Love
- C. The Precautions and Counsels to a Religious
- D. Letters

These, together with some account of his life offer an easy and complete picture of St John of the Cross and his doctrine, as a *Sample*.

It is better to read each work right to the end. The reason for a complete reading is not to pick up practical tips for the spiritual life. Rather, it is a matter of their mystical value. Most of the *Canticle* and all *The Living Flame* speak marvellously of the mysteries of the Trinity, Christ, divinizing grace, love, indwelling, glory, man's dignity. These realities are by far the most important; they are primary in whatever stage of the spiritual life a person may be. It is a grave defect to read the mystics only for the practical tips related to the actual state of the reader.

John is a structured writer and is systematic when narrating or describing. The reader should know the internal organisation of each work and the co-ordination of the works among themselves. Whatever theme the Saint develops, one needs to re-situate it within this general framework:

* Taken from the lecture notes of Fr Federico OCD, Teresianum, Rome.

experience of love and search
through renunciation and night
to the full meeting with God.

The writings of St John retain the content and the dialogue method of his oral teaching. The reader meets his teacher in direct contact.

The Prologues are important.

Prol. *Ascent*: A substantial and solid doctrine for anyone who wants to follow the way of the Gospel; requires courage and clarity to commit oneself without conditions.

Prol. *Canticle*: Words of mystical experience require some affinity.

Letter to the nuns at Beas: 22.11.1587. Too many ideas, too much information. What is lacking is living and real praxis; 'work and silence'.

To the above excerpts from Fr Federico's notes it may be useful to add the following:

For the life-story of St John of the Cross, the Introduction to the Kavanaugh edition of the Works is a sufficient minimum.

The full life by Fr Chrisogono would be preferable. It is the fruit of scholarly research and gives many interesting details.

The Life by Fr Bruno is more reflective and seems to capture the real St John better. But it is not a beginner's book. It could be read after a first reading of the Complete Works.

In each work it is recommended to read the Prologue or Introduction very carefully, then the Poem, afterwards the commentary and repeat the reading of the Poem.

Dark Night I could be read in conjunction with *Ascent* I, since the active and passive Nights run concurrently.

In *Ascent* II, begin with chapter 5 on the nature of union with God; then chapter 7 and chapter 22 which show how the figure of Christ is at the centre of St John's teaching.

For *Dark Night* I, perhaps chapter 8 might be looked at to begin with; it deals with the nature and causes of the Night.

In *The Living Flame*, there is a long digression to help spiritual directors (stanza 3:28 — 67). It is sometimes referred to as a little Mystical *Summa*. It could be read before *Ascent* II, or later as a clarification of the whole mystical journey.

Some think that *The Spiritual Canticle* is the best introduction to St John. Much would depend on the reader's maturity, and his familiarity with poetic imagery. But a selected reading from the *Canticle* might well be included in the first 'sample', e.g. stanza 1:3—12.

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